

Sphinx Academy

Education Reimagined

Creating opportunities for niche organizations
in a high choice landscape



In fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Leadership and Learning in Organizations
Vanderbilt University - Peabody College
Dr. Laura Booker, Capstone Advisor



Creating Opportunities for Niche Organizations in a High Choice Landscape
by
Jason Hurst

MA, University of Kentucky, 2010
BS, Berea College, 2005

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Table of Contents

List of Tables ii

List of Figures..... iii

Executive Summary 1

 Introduction.....4

 Context..... 6

 The Organization: Sphinx Academy, Fayette County Kentucky’s Only
 Accredited Full Time Micro School 7

 Problem of Practice.....10

 Enrollment Trends 13

 School Choice 13

 Technology in Education and the Emergence of the Micro School 16

 Conceptual Framework..... 18

 Research Questions.....23

 Data Collection 24

 Data Analysis26

 Findings.....27

 Recommendations.....39

 Implications.....45

 Limitations45

References46

Appendix A: Interview Templates and Guides51

List of Tables

Table 1 Data Collection..... 25

Table 2 Capabilities and Resources 36

List of Figures

Figure 1 Percentage distribution of students ages 3–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), by disability type: School year 2018–19 12

Figure 2 VRIO Framework of Analysis..... 19

Figure 3 STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning) Marketing Model..... 21

Executive Summary

In 2013, The Sphinx Academy was founded to create educational opportunities for gifted and talented students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), often referred to as “twice-exceptional”, who struggled in traditional and other specialized programs. The school, like the “Sphinx,” is a hybrid; combining learning independence as in the Montessori model, with freedom of exploration often found in homeschooling, and multiple intelligence strategies used in special education. After five years of increased enrollment and a string of successful graduates, Sphinx Academy is facing enrollment slump amidst an increase of choices and innovation within public and private secondary education in Fayette County. This quality improvement project sought to understand why enrollment at Sphinx Academy has declined and stagnated.

Resource-based view and the VRIO (Value, Rare, Imitability, Organization) framework were used to shape this study. Resource Based View approach is a managerial framework used to determine competitive advantage with the potential to create sustainable competitive advantages and improve strategic decision making. The VRIO framework helped to determine the school’s resources and capabilities resources and capabilities which may be leveraged to create competitive advantages in a diverse market. The **three study questions** that are addressed are:

1. Why are parents choosing Sphinx Academy over other options?
2. Who are the key competitors in the high choice landscape of Fayette County?
3. What resources and capabilities bring value to Sphinx Academy and which ones can be leveraged? What is unique about Sphinx Academy?

By conducting interviews with key stakeholders (i.e., members of the board, director, staff, and current and former parents) and reviewing the organization's presence on digital platforms, **three key findings** emerged.

1. Parents were finding the organization through their personal network or by an exhaustive search.
2. Parents with at least one child enrolled chose Sphinx Academy for the small classrooms, safe learning environment, and flexible and innovative curriculum.
3. The key competitor to the Sphinx Academy is a similarly structured organization called KORE Academy. KORE Academy targets students with learning differences but lacks the structured curriculum and academic rigor available at Sphinx Academy.
4. Sphinx Academy has numerous underutilized resources and capabilities and valued resources and capabilities that are not reaching their target market.

Based on these findings, **three recommendations** were made to the Sphinx Academy:

1. Sphinx should clearly define their mission and develop a dedicated marketing strategy around their brand identity.
2. Sphinx Academy should leverage social media and their current network of parents to help reach their target market.
3. Sphinx Academy should differentiate themselves from the key competitor while highlighting what makes them an attractive secondary school option to parents by leveraging

their unique extracurricular programs and mentoring program as an integral compliment to their customized learning experience.

Introduction

Gifted and talented students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), such as dyslexia, attention deficit disorder (ADD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADH), or autism, referred to as “twice-exceptional or 2e”, are among the most underserved students in our communities (Assouline, 2010). Although it is hard to determine the number of 2e students due to lack of reporting and the variations of conditions, estimated numbers of students who may be identified range from 2%-6% of the U.S. student populace (Nielsen, 2015). These students are often stuck between highly competitive, fast pace, heavy load, and high stress gifted and talented programs and special education programs which are low load, slow pace, and focused on disabilities. Twice exceptional students need to be challenged but also supported.

In the high choice landscape of secondary education in Fayette County, Kentucky, Dr. Wafaa Elghoroury’s son, diagnosed with “severe ADHD” and gifted with “superior intelligence,” consistently failed in traditional classrooms and specialized programs. After exhausting available options, despite being a trained physician, Dr. Elghoroury went back to school to earn a bachelor’s degree in education alongside training in Montessori. She concluded that although students with learning differences were often gifted and talented, most schools focused on implementing an educational model rather than accommodating the students.

In 2013, Dr. Elghoroury founded a blended learning micro school to create educational opportunities for students who were not successful in traditional and other specialized programs. Micro schools are small privately funded independent schools, usually with limited instructional

days. They are considered a “disruptive innovation in education” by the Clayton Christensen Institute, a nonprofit think tank. Dr. Elghoroury’s micro school uses multiple educational models and intervention strategies, such as professional medical diagnosis of attentional challenges, alongside appropriate interventions in a Montessori environment to achieve student focus (Murphy-Ryan, 2017).

After five years of increased enrollment and a string of successful graduates, Sphinx Academy is facing enrollment slump amidst an increase of choices and innovation within public and private secondary education in Fayette County. The shift in policy to create specialized programs in the public sector has introduced a more competitive market environment in which schools compete for students and parents are intended to have a wider range of choice (Bagley, 2006). The private schools have responded by diversifying their offerings as well. To understand how Sphinx Academy can effectively respond to stagnant enrollment and increased competition, stakeholders must examine the 'parent as consumer' marketing orientation.

The purpose of this study is to understand why enrollment at Sphinx Academy has stagnated by determining the critical factors that lead parents to choose Sphinx Academy. This project seeks to understand which critical factors are influencing parents to choose Sphinx Academy over the array of secondary school options in Fayette County and uncover perceptions of resources which may be utilized to create competitive advantages and improve performance. By understanding the factors that influence school choice and Sphinx Academy’s niche in

Fayette County, I hope to elucidate why and how parents are choosing Sphinx Academy and if Sphinx Academy is reaching its' target market.

Context

Secondary Education in Fayette County, KY

Over 42,000 students are enrolled K-12 in Fayette County, KY with roughly 12,000 enrolled in secondary education. Fayette County's public education system offers three technical centers and 11 specialized programs which include Gifted and Talented; Math, Science and Technology; Cultural and Performing Arts; and Agriculture specialized programs. In addition, there are Montessori and religious based alternatives as well as a High Achievers program in a private Catholic School. Many of these specialized programs have gained national recognition within the last 10 years. The specialized programs within the two predominant private schools were only created within the last five years.

In addition to traditional opportunities, a handful of Fayette County's students are enrolled in the Wayne County school district by taking online courses, paid for by the Fayette County Public Schools. Wayne County counts successful students in its attendance numbers which increases their state funding. The numbers are not as significant compared to the Fayette County's population but decreases a key demographic for alternative education organizations, like Sphinx Academy.

Although the county sets high standards for education and public school students consistently score above state and national averages on the ACT and SAT, secondary education private school enrollment numbers have surged according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES). A majority of secondary school graduates matriculate to college.

The Organization: Sphinx Academy, Fayette County Kentucky's Only Accredited Full Time Micro School

Sphinx Academy is a non-profit secondary education micro school in Lexington, Kentucky. Dr. Elghoroury founded Sphinx Academy after exploring the idea of blended learning, micro schools, and big picture schools, all focused on small numbers and facilitators instead of teachers. The school, like the "Sphinx," is a hybrid; combining learning independence as in the Montessori model, with freedom of exploration often found in homeschooling, and multiple intelligence strategies used in special education.

Sphinx Academy opened its doors with an enrollment of five students in 2013. The school saw steady growth each successive year until the 2019 school year. Sphinx Academy initially enrolled students from mostly homeschooling families looking for alternatives and then gained some attention from students enrolled in Montessori based education and other specialized programs. Sphinx Academy thrived with higher levels of personalization and a lower cost business model than local private schools. There is no marketing budget and Sphinx Academy has thrived on word of mouth from the initial group of homeschool converts.

The growth of Sphinx Academy led to a wider curriculum base using Summit Learning. Summit Learning is a free online tool that provides data on mentor meetings, the percentage of students on track, student goals, and real-time feedback about modalities of instruction. Summit Learning provides a platform for each student to have a personalized learning experience through customized projects and teacher designed courses, content, and assessment. Attendance is kept for all in-person classes, virtual meetings, and self-directed learning.

Electives courses and extracurricular courses at Sphinx Academy are planned and designed based on student interests and needs. Students have taken such diverse offerings as Japanese and other languages, an aviation STEM curriculum that certifies pilots through Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association's Aviation Program, archery, ukulele, and every year there is an opportunity for international travel. The past year's group had to cancel their trip to Japan due to COVID-19. In prior years student groups traveled to several European destinations and the Galapagos Islands. Sophomores, juniors, and seniors take dual credit courses at the University of Kentucky and affiliates. Students are encouraged to be proactive within the school and in the larger community by starting clubs, organizing community service projects, and doing independent studies. The school is nationally accredited through AdvancEd, as well as certification in the state of Kentucky.

As enrollment increased, Sphinx Academy expanded their rented learning space in a shopping center on the east side of Lexington next to the Driver's Licensing Office and hired additional staff to keep student to teacher ratios at 8:1. The academic year was expanded to a

year-round model in 2018. Most multi-child families have only one student at Sphinx Academy. The enrollment the first year was 5 students and peaked at 38 students in 2018. The organization is entering its seventh year and has a current enrollment of 34 students in grades 8-12 which is consistent with the 2019 enrollment.

An additional, unexpected, but important aspect of the context is the external factor of the current pandemic. Sphinx Academy, by virtue of its online learning platform was better positioned to handle the state mandated transition to online learning in March 2020. The school closing coincided with the qualitative interviews and data collection for this project. Schools in Fayette County remained closed to in-person instruction and continuing remote instruction in late August 2020 based on Governor Beshear's recommendation until March 2021.

Some schools, mostly private schools, opened for in person instruction against recommendations. After surveying stakeholders, Sphinx Academy adapted to the current pandemic to a hybrid model. Parents split into factions between going back to school full time with safety protocols and going fully virtual. An attempt to meet everyone in the middle and maintain as much consistency for the kids as possible led to compromise. The compromise was virtual classes and mentorship Monday, Tuesday, Thursday, and Friday and on campus opportunities on Wednesdays for projects and workshops. Students and staff follow strict protocols which include masks and social distancing when on campus.

Problem of Practice

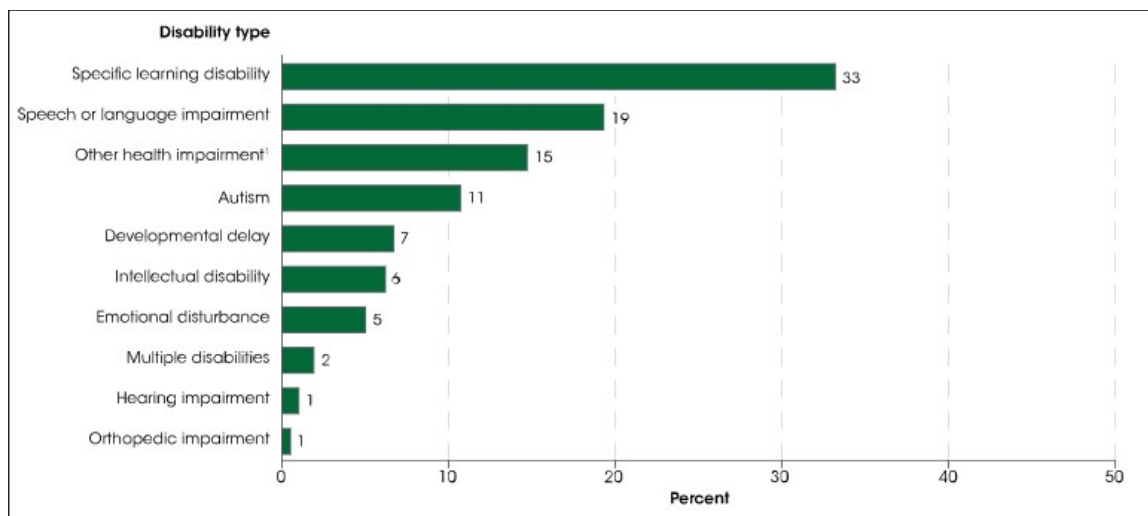
According to National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) data, private school enrollment had been decreasing since 2005 but began increasing in 2016. Two possible explanation for the increase is that private schools have adopted technologies to sustain innovation and, locally, by responding to the trend of emphasis on STEM learning and gifted and talented programs. Private schools in Fayette County have seen surges in enrollment numbers. In the same time frame, public schools in Fayette County have improved their offerings, gained national reputation for their specialized programs, and are using technology to innovate, like Dunbar High School’s Math Science Technology Center (MSTC), the Liberal Arts Academy at Henry Clay High School, the School for the Creative and Performing Arts at Lafayette High School, and Locust Trace AgriScience Center. Fayette County has suspended in-person classes until March 2021. The lack of in-person classes has led to an even further increase in private school enrollment in Fayette County and across the country.

Sphinx Academy directly competes with KORE Academy. KORE Academy is a K-12 school founded in 2003 that serves students with learning differences such as dyslexia, ADD/ADHD, language-based learning disabilities, processing or sensory disorders, and high-functioning autism. KORE Academy predominantly adopts a special education model with individualized instruction. KORE Academy has 40 students and 12 instructors. Sphinx Academy focuses more on the 2e student while KORE’s more focused on learning differences. Dr. Elghoury addressed both organizations meeting a particular niche of the student population, “Competition only matters in the sense that we want the students to go to the place that serves

them the most. I have referred at least two students to KORE, and they have referred at least three students to us. Mostly we try to figure out where the students fit best.”

Sphinx Academy targets students who would benefit from a small educational community that alleviates many of the stressors and is not burdened with the limitations of a large traditional school. Sphinx Academy’s educational framework was designed to serve “twice-exceptional” and gifted students. From online database searches and through multiple communications with the Kentucky education community, I could not find another program that serves this population in Kentucky and that may be a reason why students commute long distances from surrounding counties to attend Sphinx Academy. According to the 2019 U.S. Census Estimate, Fayette County has a population of 323,152, a metropolitan area population of 517,056 people, and a combined statistical area of 745,033 people which is roughly 16.7% of the Kentucky’s total population. Fayette County Public Schools serves about 42,559 students, 12,322 in secondary school. According to NCES data, 14% of all public-school students received special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and 33% of those students have specific learning disabilities. To assume that Sphinx Academy has tapped out its current market of students who would benefit from the specialized educational program offered or are twice exceptional would be unreasonable.

Figure 1 Percentage distribution of students ages 3–21 served under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), by disability type: School year 2018–19



SOURCE: US Department of Education (2019)

The stagnant enrollment of Sphinx Academy in Fayette County’s wider choice landscape has created a fiscal strain on Sphinx Academy and its ability maintain its facilities, resources, and customized level of instruction. Dr. Elghoroury has had to eschew a salary and step in from her role as Director to a more hands-on role which includes helping to facilitate students as a mentor. Strapped for resources, Sphinx Academy lacks the community reputation, outreach, and marketing to drive student enrollment and awareness. There is no dedicated grant writing and limited revenue streams beyond tuition and donations.

Review of the Literature

The first section of literature reviewed includes a discussion of enrollment trends and how parents choose a school. This will be followed by a brief discussion of the types of school options available in Fayette County and the theoretical frameworks guiding the research.

Enrollment Trends

Though several studies address declining and stagnant enrollment in private and public schools and the rise of enrollment in private education as a trend since 1960 (Edelman & Knudsen, 1990; McLellan, 2000; Prendergast, 1998), literature addressing examples of emerging micro schools in the context of increased market competition is limited. Private schools rely mostly on tuition to operate. Enrollment trends can have significant financial implications to the organization. Increasing and maintaining a functional enrollment stabilizes the budget, supports programming, strategic initiatives, and helps with staff retention. Schools with higher enrollment tend to have a better overall financial health, offer competitive salaries, articulate value proposition, meet families' financial need, and have an overall sustainability of the school's business model (Daughtry, 2016). With smaller operating budgets, micro schools are particularly vulnerable to enrollment trends.

Parents care about academic quality but define academic quality in different ways. Decisions are embedded in a social context. The first step of the process is forming a choice set and is highly informed by our social network. Constraints include income, transportation, geographic location, and information.

School Choice

One of the most important ways that parents are involved in a child's education is by deciding which school the child attends. Major school reforms that have been enacted or considered include desegregation, the rise of magnet schools in public education, education

vouchers that divert funds to private education, and charter schools. These policies have all been influenced by parents who want to opportunities to decide which school their children attend. When there are no public policies in place, parents exercise choice by deciding where to live and weighing private and public-school opportunities. (Golding, 2008).

There is an increasing amount of empirical literature on parental choice in specific markets as school choice programs emerge and an increasing number of families are participating. Given an array of options, school choice theory asserts that fully informed parents are capable in finding a school that matches their child's needs. Critics argue that few parents are aware of the available options. Low-income families are particularly vulnerable about having access to the information and selecting the best option. This demographic typically chooses a school based on convenience instead of best fit for the student or educational quality. Parents who opted to choose a school rather than have their children attend the local public school tended to be more informed (Erickson, 2017). Typically, they had attended fairs, visited schools, and/or obtained informational packets. They were also likely informed by their social and professional networks (Bosetti, 2004).

Although parents largely state academic quality as a critical factor for choosing a school, it is not always the key factor; and the decision can be influenced by a school's brand identity (Trivitt, 2011). Parents also exercised school choice when they were dissatisfied with their current program. Parents who exercise school choice tend to be more satisfied with their current program considering other factors. Other factors influencing parental decision were

demographics, parental involvement, and social networks (Goldring, 2008). Parents that chose public school, private school, and religious private schools were motivated by different clustering factors. Parents that choose alternatives to traditional offerings seek a particular type of school experience for their children and look at the value added, teaching style, smaller class size, and a school community that reflects their values and beliefs. These parents are the most likely to include their child in the school selection process. (Bosetti, 2004).

In Fayette County, there are public schools, private and religious schools, home schooled children, and a micro school. There is some evidence that some parents may opt for “unschooling” as well, which was initially thought of as a form of homeschooling. “Unschools” eschew the traditional model in every sense and focuses on a curiosity driven education. Public schools were formed and founded and then shaped by the progressive education movement inspired by Dewey and others. Public schools are the default option for most families. Public schools are limited by funding, number of students, and focus on standardized testing. Private school parents tend envision that their children’s needs are different or not being met by the local public school. Private schools are independent from public schools, can decide their own curriculum, usually have a smaller teacher to student ratio, and may offer faith-based learning (Wells, 1999).

Home schooling and micro schools are the least chosen education options. Home schooling grew after public schooling was mandated. Most parents that home school have pedagogical and/or ideological reasons. For most communities, a micro school fills a niche in the

educational landscape; often organized by home school parents looking for opportunities in a shared learning environment or traditional school parents looking for alternatives based on student needs. Considered an innovation in education, most of the literature considers the growth of the business model. There is no academic standard for micro schools, but each have a core mission or goal. Micro schools are often considered a modern version of the one-room schoolhouse model of the past (Horn, 2015).

Technology in Education and the Emergence of the Micro School

The role of technology in education has made high level and customized learning resources accessible on micro and macro scales. Organizations like the Khan Academy and High Tech High demonstrates the feasibility of individualized classes and the blended learning model at scale. Blended learning is a formal education program in which a student learns partially through online learning with some elements of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace combined with learning at a physical location away from home with supervision and facilitation. The learning modalities within a course or subject are connected to provide an integrated learning experience. Blended learning schools track student progress through responsive formative assessments. The computer-based data systems give feedback that aid in correlating modality to topic and level. Modalities include online, one-on-one, or small group learning formats.

The blended learning platform is a relatively new concept that is available due to the accessibility and current state of technology. Educational leaders must focus on implementation

to use technology to enhance the accessibility and usability of curricular materials to meet the needs of different types of learners and provide appropriate training to educators through preparation for online learning (Basham, Smith, Greer, & Marino, 2013). The micro school ultimately relies on adoption and use of technology by stakeholders to have a viable low-cost high-quality organizational model.

The rise of micro schools in the US can be attributed in part to newly available technology and resources, but more closely tied to parent dissatisfaction with local schooling options and the high cost of traditional private schools. Families seek micro schools when they want personalized instruction for their child's needs outside of homeschooling (Horn, 2015).

Parents choose schools based on array of factors including educational quality and student need and are influenced by their social networks and available options based on location. Most parents are not fully informed when choosing a school and unaware of all the options available. Public schools are standardized in their learning goals on what students should know and be able to do at each grade level. Private schools are independent alternatives that operate without public funding and have their own learning standards. Enrollment tuition provides the basis for all operating costs except for a few exceptions like Milton Hershey School which operates entirely with funding from the endowment. Innovations in technology has made it financially viable for new alternatives like micro schools to fill sought after educational niches. Blended learning models have progressed individualized education.

Conceptual Framework

RBV and the VRIO framework

Resource-based view (RBV) is an extension of Porter's Five Forces, which is a strategic management framework used to analyze an organization's competitive environment to build on the organization's competitive advantage and position (Wernerfelt, 1984). Porter (1980) asserted that organizations should analyze their competitive environment to form strategies and then, acquire the resources to implement those strategies. Once an organization exploits its competitive advantage, the advantage can be sustained if the organization has above average returns (Porter, 1984).

Porter's framework assumes that organizations in the competitive environment have the same access to resources they can control and the ability to pursue similar strategies. RBV is operational for an organization with idiosyncratic resources where a sustained competitive advantage can be achieved if the organization's competitors' strategies are redundant or do not negatively affect the organization's competitive advantage (Barney, 1991). Barney developed a theoretical tool to use an organization's internal resources to derive a sustained competitive advantage. If the resources and/or capabilities were valuable, rare, inimitable and non-substitutable (VRIN), there was the potential to create sustainable competitive advantages.

Acknowledging the criticism that the VRIN framework could not explain performance or how the resources and capabilities were managed after they were developed the "N" was converted to "O" for Organization which assessed how well the organization could exploit the

resources and/or capabilities (Barney, 1995). VRIO (Value, Rare, Imitability, Organization) is an internal analysis of an organization used to identify and evaluate resources in an organization. By assessing these four qualities of a resource or capability an organization can determine whether those resources can be leveraged to create sustained competitive advantage. Rumelt (1984) identified four bundles or areas of analysis regarding resources: financial, human capital, material, and non-material.

Figure 2 VRIO Framework of Analysis

	V VALUABLE	R RARE	I IMITABLE	O ORGANIZED	
NO					COMPETITIVE DISADVANTAGE
YES		NO			COMPETITIVE PARITY
YES		YES	NO		TEMPORARY COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
YES		YES	YES	NO	UNUSED COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE
YES		YES	YES	YES	SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

The VRIO framework is structured by analyzing resources and capabilities, using the four indicators of valuable, rarity, imitability and organization.

The four evaluations used to analysis the VRIO framework, are as follows:

- a) Valuable: whether these resources/capabilities can make the operational process more efficient and effective or used to exploit external opportunities or counteract threats.
- b) Rare: whether the resources/capabilities are accessible by a small number of companies or rarely owned by other companies.

c) Imitability: whether the resources/capabilities are hard to imitate.

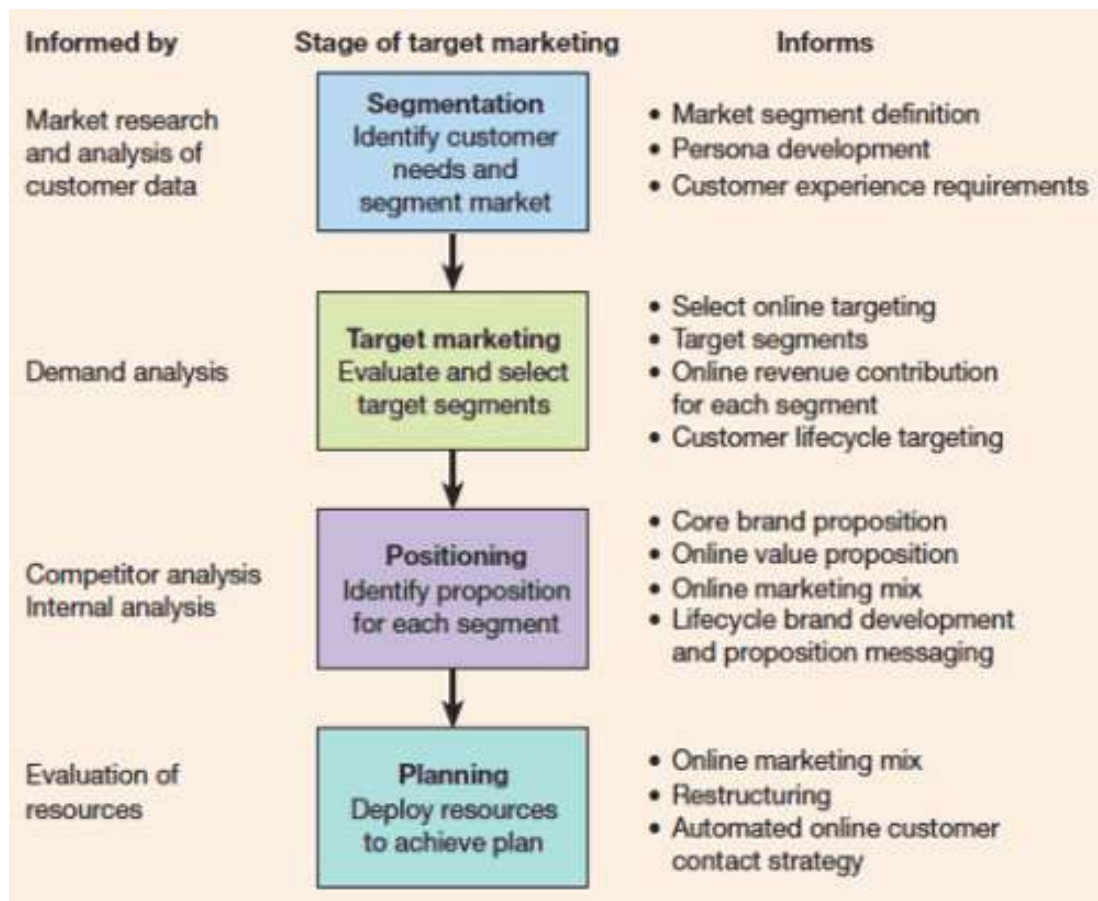
d) Organization: whether the resources/capabilities are supported and managed by the organization.

Positioning Theory

The VRIO framework brings together Positioning and Resource Based View (Barney & Hesterly, 2008). Positioning is an important concept due to its role in developing competitive advantage. Positioning theory can aid in understanding organizational strategies and identities to lead change. Micro schools are already an attempt at create a niche in a crowded educational landscape. Approaching the stagnant enrollment and lack of local recognition of Sphinx Academy in the context of the positioning theory allows us to analyze organizational structure and dynamics and marketing / customer perspectives.

Analysis in the positioning theory framework identifies groups within the market (segmentation) to identify potential customers (targeting) and how to position your organization towards those groups (positioning). The commonly applied marketing framework utilizing positioning theory is the STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning) Marketing model. Organizational needs, challenges, and context to inform actions can also be inferred. For a niche organization with low resources, identifying potential customers and positioning your organization for their needs is key to competing.

Figure 3 STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning) Marketing Model



The positioning theoretical framework can contribute to an enhanced understanding of organizational change by providing a better understanding of contexts and what motivates customers so that the organization can prioritize propositions and to engage its target audience. It allows consideration of multiple levels of social analysis - people, institutions and society (Zelle, 2009). Positioning theory is the lens through which you can observe markets, customers, needs, competitors and customers segments differently. Framing the problem as organizational and contextual within the high choice landscape of Fayette County for consumers needs can give insight into engaging potential and existing customers.

According to the Director of Sphinx Academy, the primary factors for parents choosing Sphinx Academy over other options are related to safe, customized learning in a small school / class environment. The key competition in Fayette County are specialized programs that support independent learners with specific learning disabilities.

Porter (1980) asserted that an organization's strategies should focus on building and sustaining competitive advantages. Resources and capabilities are critically important to utilize to create competitive advantages for an organization. Sustained competitive advantages allow an organization to outperform competitors. Being a niche and young organization with limited resources, Sphinx Academy has idiosyncratic resources and capabilities. Using Resource-based view and the VRIO framework to evaluate Sphinx Academy's resources and capabilities and determine sources of sustained competitive advantage will inform strategic decision making (Barney, 1991).

A fundamental marketing concept is that to maximize customer base, an organization must position its services in the market so that customers believe they have a need for the service or that the service they need has a particular benefit. In positioning theory in a marketing context, 'position' refers to the communication strategies that enable a product to be placed amongst its competitors (Harré & van Langenhove, 1991). After an initial surge of enrollment, Sphinx Academy has not developed a brand or marketing strategy. Strategy is the gap between mission

and vision, between the organization's current position and its desired position. The brand is not positioned to reach its target audience, nor has it evaluated its competitive position.

Research Questions

The first question that will guide the research for this capstone is: How are parents finding Sphinx Academy and why are they choosing Sphinx Academy over other options? Determining how parents are informed about Sphinx Academy and why they chose Sphinx Academy for their student will allow the organizations to understand how and if they are reaching their target audience and what factors were most attractive in the secondary education market. As an independent school, their ability to reach their target market is integral to increasing enrollment.

The second question is: Who are the key competitors in the high choice landscape of Fayette County? Identifying key competitors will help evaluate Sphinx Academy's competitive position in the market. Key competitors are competing for the same niche customer segment that Sphinx Academy is trying to reach. The students who would benefit most from Sphinx Academy's educational offerings is a small percentage of the total market. A comparison of Sphinx Academy to key competitors should inform strategic decisions about resources and competitive parity.

The third question is: What resources and capabilities bring value to Sphinx Academy and which ones can be leveraged, specifically, what is unique about Sphinx Academy?

Identifying which resources and capabilities that give Sphinx Academy competitive advantage or can be leveraged will help inform a marketing strategy against competitors while helping understand what customers want. Identifying those resources and capabilities that Sphinx Academy don't bring value to the organization may inform recommendations for improvements.

Study Design

The capstone project utilized several qualitative data collection and analysis techniques to address the project questions. I interviewed key members of the Board of Directors, current and former parents who chose Sphinx Academy for at least one of their children, and an educator/facilitator. The founder/director was asked key questions aligned with RBV. The stakeholder interviews determine what critical factors are associated with enrollment and perceptions of Sphinx Academy. Additionally, I obtained and categorized the online reviews, social media interactions, and marketing materials for analysis.

The semi-structured interview template starts with the five questions listed in Appendix A. Interviews were semi structured to allow for in-depth follow-up questions that get at the heart of why the audience members chose Sphinx Academy (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Data Collection

Sphinx Academy includes five educators, two administrators, and 12 board members. I interviewed the director and board member, Wafaa Elghoury, seven current and former parents (two of which are on the board), and a facilitator/educator whose children do not attend Sphinx

Academy. Most of the parents had at least one child not enrolled, and their children fit into several different demographics to achieve a distribution of stakeholders across organizational levels and demographics. I conducted a final interview with Dr. Elghoury. The final interview with Dr. Elghoury used a separate interview protocol to determine competitive advantage in the context of competition, strategy, and markets.

Table 1 Data Collection

	Research Question	Data Collection	Analysis	Translating Data to Findings
1	How are parents finding Sphinx Academy and why are they choosing Sphinx Academy over other options?	Literature Review Interviews of Parents Reviews and Responses on Digital Platforms	Examine when parents became aware of Sphinx Academy and what perceptions they had. Identify determinants of school choice from the relevant literature that aligned with the factors that influenced parents to choose Sphinx Academy.	Make recommendations for Sphinx Academy which align with the determinants of school choice and identify what resources are being utilized and are most effective to reach and communicate those factors to potential parents.
2	Who are the key competitors in the high choice landscape of Fayette County?	Interviews of Founder and Board Members	Interview founder and board members regarding what competitors who offer similar services or serve the same customer base.	Evaluate Sphinx Academy's competitive position with their target market.
3	What resources and capabilities bring value to Sphinx Academy and which ones can be leveraged?	Literature Review Interviews of Founder, Board Members, Staff, and Parents	Utilize literature to determine which resources and capabilities bring sustained value to Sphinx Academy to gain insight into opportunities for this niche organization. Interview clients and stakeholders regarding perceived strengths and areas of opportunity regarding current offerings from Sphinx Academy.	Use the VRIO framework to evaluate those resources and capabilities for competitive advantage or competitive disadvantage.

Data Analysis

Inductive coding was used to first look for themes. Codes were developed from a thematic analysis of the interviews based on my research questions, and literature review: Then deductive coding was done to narrow down themes aligned with the literature on school choice, competitive advantage and the VRIO framework. The codes used were: Small class size, Competitors, Mentoring program, Flexibility, Communication, Strategy, 2e, Financial, Curriculum, Market, Wafaa, Staff, Online Learning, Presentation, and Safety. Codes related to why parents chose Sphinx Academy over other options in Fayette County that was aligned with the literature on School Choice were Flexibility, Safety, Online Learning, Small Class Size, Curriculum, and Wafaa. The code Competitors was related to key competitors to Sphinx Academy. Mentoring Program, Online Learning, Staff, and 2e emerged by looking for resources and capabilities that bring value to Sphinx Academy based on the VRIO framework. There was some overlap in the coding themes.

The data was analyzed using the VRIO framework to determine if the capabilities and resources represented by the codes had a competitive advantage, could be leveraged to create one or if the organization were at a competitive disadvantage.

First, the value of a resource or capability was determined through the interviews and identified by stakeholders. Resources and capabilities that did not have value to the organization were also identified. If a resource was considered valuable, the next step is to determine its rarity. Rarity was determined by checking if other competitors offer something similar and if

there was persistent customer demand. Imitability was then determined by asking "Will it be expensive for other organizations to replicate or imitate?" The O in VRIO is for Organization and related to the question, "Does the organizations have solid systems, structures, and processes to exploit the advantage the resource or capability has?"

Findings

In the following section, I present the key findings that emerged from the analysis of the interviews and documents.

How are parents finding Sphinx Academy?

Word of mouth was by far the most prevalent way that parents learned about Sphinx Academy. Many current parents found Sphinx Academy by their home school network that they belonged to or by exhausting other options. The message of what the organization's mission was varied greatly throughout the interviews. Some parents liked Sphinx's role as a school that embraced learning differences, while others thought that the "stigma" of being a school full of kids with learning differences was contrary to what the school was and did not want their child stereotyped by their learning difference. None of their marketing efforts have delivered results. A parent explained Sphinx Academy like this:

Yeah, that night walking out that night walking out the parking lot. I just said, "What do you think?", and he said, "I want going to go there, and it's more like me!" It is so different from the experience he had before. I think he knew but what would explain it to

you- I was trying to figure out the differences between my daughter and him; why he loved that place so much ... and she goes there, and she is just miserable. So, I am like, what kind of what body of water, do you think you are, or what kind of body of water do you like. My daughter said “I don't know, I like everyone. I like all like oceans and puddles. I like everything.” And I asked him, and he immediately said, “a secret pond.” And this is the secret pond. I think this is the best thing about Lexington. Do not tell anybody!

The sentiment that Sphinx Academy is still an undiscovered gem despite existing nearly a decade echoed several times. One pervasive experience was that parents and stakeholders always had to explain what and where the organization is and defend it as being a school. One parent who describes himself as an early adopter for innovation and technology noted, “Now you must explain what Sphinx Academy is to everybody. And you are not always in the mood to go through that because most people in Kentucky are not early adopters. In Silicon Valley, you can just say it.”

Most interviews noted the lack of representation and awareness of Sphinx Academy in the larger community. An instructor who came from a public school noted that despite the stagnant enrollment there are likely many more students who would benefit from Sphinx Academy’s educational model, “A lot of the kids that we have gotten are kids who have fallen behind like in a larger public high school and they are dealing with something like socially

related... or something else . . . But just kids that need to slow down a little bit. I keep thinking **these kids are the same kids I have [taught in public school].”**

Why are parents choosing Sphinx Academy?

Small class size, flexibility in class structure and the learning curriculum, and a safe environment were the frequently mentioned reasons that parents gave for choosing Sphinx Academy while the founder and staff believed it to be the small class size, flexible learning environment, and the mentoring program. The parents rarely mentioned the mentoring program but mentioned the effects of the mentoring program by remarking how much the staff know their children and the staff’s ability to work with them. The mentoring program is a key factor in creating a safe environment for the students targeted by Sphinx Academy, but parents are not explicitly aware of it. Their Aerospace program and other specialized classes and projects are a large draw.

The average class size is seven students. Along with the online learning platform, parents felt that their students were receiving a personalized education. For students attracted to Sphinx Academy, there are often issues that are difficult to resolve in other learning environments. One parent mentioned, “C. was ADD and we did not realize that he also has an auditory processing disorder. Yeah, we did not realize that was probably what is causing him to struggle academically. So, we knew we knew we needed something smaller.” Small class sizes can also be a challenge. One parent lamented,

I think one of the challenges and one of the good things is that it is small, socially. If you do not find your person there, then there is not a lot. So, I mean, he is social there. And there was some drama with some people that included some isolating. And so, you know, that is hard when there is only 30 people, and four the people stop talking to you for two months, like, that is weird. Um, but that's kind of normal teenager stuff.

Sphinx Academy's flexible class structure and instructional time were lauded by most parents. Students work at their own pace and in the discipline of their choosing. A parent remarked, "Well, I think this is more like real work environment, you are working on projects and you can do what you like. If you need a break, you can walk outside for 15 minutes. You can never do that at a public school. I thought it modeled more of a real-life work setting." Another mentioned liking that his child could "work on math all day long if he wanted to. And not have the regiment of 8:30 to 9:30, you are going to work on that."

Another aspect of the organization's flexibility is in the personalized learning curriculum through the online platform and the unique classes, projects, and trips that they do because of their small size. All the electives, trips, and independent projects are student directed and student centered. They currently offer Japanese as a language and were planning a trip to Japan pre-pandemic because that is where the student interest was. They offer aviation and aerospace courses. A parent described some of the experiential learning engaged in:

Like they built a satellite, and they got to go see it launched at NASA. The first year he was there, the kids needed tables, and so these kids said well we will build the tables. And so Wafaa, she let them design a table. She bought all the stuff. Those are simply great experiences for kids to have that do not have anything to do with you being different. It is just an opportunity that kids in public schools do not get.

The curriculum being on an online platform allowed a student to surge ahead in some subjects while being at or below grade level in others.

Sphinx Academy strives to be a safe, supportive, and nurturing environment for learning. Several parents chose Sphinx Academy because their students had experienced physical and social harm being bullied. The nurturing structure of the mentoring program is vital for students with learning differences. A parent expressed that Sphinx Academy is a “safe place to struggle” further explaining that “I just I really wanted a safe place for him. I wanted a place that was going to challenge him but allow him to get accommodations he needed.”

It is important to note that no parent mentioned the mentoring program, yet everyone interviewed from the staff and board did. The mentoring program is a vital part of Sphinx Academy. Because educators are not locked into instructional time and serve as facilitators, they can cater to students’ specific needs. The mentoring program would be hard to accomplish to the extent that Sphinx Academy executes it in a traditional setting. The educators act as mentors who

are trained in learning differences (LD) specific to the students they mentor and create relationships that go beyond a traditional setting. Dr. Elghoroury notes that

The service we are focused on is possibly serving twice exceptional students since it is more difficult to serve them in larger programs. The combination of being challenged but also getting accommodations is difficult to do in a large setting. We also focus on the effectiveness of our mentor program.

Parents were impressed at the quality of educators at the Sphinx Academy. The staff were underpaid comparative to what they would be offered in another public or independent organization and lacked all traditional benefits. The secret ingredient was the belief in the mission of the organization and the opportunity to work with Dr. Elghoroury.

Dr. Elghoroury was mentioned many times as being the pivot point of whether parents would choose Sphinx Academy. One parent remarked about the special relationship the Dr. Elghoroury and her son shared,

I think the people that work here were important to him. They have their vision and perspective seemed to match ours in the way that they treat people and, in the way, Wafaa speaks for the students. I mean she is just amazing. Then he adores them. Just the tone of them matched him. They talk about important things. And have fun. And Wafaa will talk about life, too, you know. She is super important.” Wafaa is a monumental

presence in this small organization for parents. She has done a tremendous job staffing Sphinx Academy with a very limited budget and the inability to offer benefits such as health insurance. One staff member, formerly a public school teacher, said, “They see Sphinx as a haven and Wafaa is motherly. It has been a haven for me, just like the kids.

The reasons that some parents chose not to enroll at least one of their students at Sphinx Academy included the school as being too small and the lack of sports and a band program.

Who are Sphinx Academy’s Key Competitors?

To determine key competitors to how Sphinx Academy is positioned in the market and what capabilities and resources are unique among secondary schools. Competitors serve the same purpose or compete for the same customers. The online learning platform was the rarest resource/capability among secondary schools. Online learning platforms are the innovation that made Sphinx Academy possible. Students’ classes on an online learning platform enable the instructor acts as more of a facilitator and mentor.

When I began this study, a school exclusively using an online learning platform was rare and novel. This was an attractive option for parents of children with social anxiety disorder or who were often inhibited at learning at the pace of their classmates. One aspect of an online based curriculum that appealed to some parents was that they felt it was an innovation in education and that they were early adopters. As one parent said,

I think what made the difference for me is Wafaa. She, you know this, found her passion.

Also, we are more early adopters of tech and new methodologies for things and new ideas that seem to be better than what is out there.

There has been questions around whether online learning is viable or effective for student preparedness for higher education. As a resource or capability, Sphinx proved that the platform was rigorous and may pose a better option for a sizable percentage of students. Their graduates are being accepted into top tier universities and are scoring extremely well on standardized tests. The pandemic forced a historic number of students into online classes and technology evolved by necessity. But this rare commodity, may become more commonplace for secondary schools and the number of educational startups that cater to this nontraditional form of learning is increasing. As the technology evolves, online learning may not be so uncommon.

The independent school strategy that Sphinx utilizes to reach its target audience and serve its current customers is lacking. Like most educational startups, Sphinx was created to fill an educational niche. Sphinx Academy sees itself as a service organization and not a competitor in the educational landscape. The interviews with Dr. Elghoroury's were specific to determining what competitive advantages the organization had in the high choice landscape of Fayette County. The organizational strategy can be summed up as altruistic. She says,

When I started Sphinx Academy in 2013 it was mostly because the service, I was looking for my children was not available anywhere. My children were twice exceptional with

high IQs and a combination of ADD/ADHD and depression and anxiety. All schools I have looked at (including those mentioned above) seemed to serve one or the other. So, we focus on that aspect and depend on the fact that there is nowhere else that offers what we do. Competition only matters in the sense that we want the students to go to the place that serves them the most. I have referred at least 2 students to KORE, and they have referred at least 3 students to us. Mostly we try to figure out where the students fit best.

There are other independent schools with smaller class sizes, but only one that serves the same population of students with LD. The key competitor to the Sphinx Academy is a similarly structured organization called KORE Academy. The KORE Academy has a similar mission as the Sphinx Academy and uses a blended learning model with an online curriculum, but according to parents interviewed who have children in both schools or migrated to Sphinx Academy, KORE lacks academic rigor and caters to lower functioning students. KORE Academy does not necessarily focus on 2e students- high functioning students that have one or more learning differences, KORE Academy targets students with learning differences.

Twice exceptional students are often herded into special education in traditional schools or do not reach their full academic potential in traditional classrooms. The number of students diagnosed as 2e is increasing and may represent a sizable portion of learners. Fayette County is a large enough market that more and more parent advocates who seek opportunities for their children find traditional classrooms lacking and represent an opportunity for Sphinx Academy. Last November, the Kentucky Council on Gifted and Talented Education reported that 2e

students are being overlooked and that better publicity and outreach is needed to inform parents about options available to them (Green, 2020).

Their other key competitor, The Montessori High School, is no longer in operation. Other competitors include specialized programs within larger public schools and a small private school that has a specialized program for LD students.

Capabilities and Resources in the VRIO Framework

All the resources and capabilities that were identified by stakeholders that had value or identified as not having value are included in the following table. The capabilities and resources identified were analyzed through the VRIO framework to determine if the resources and capabilities had the potential for competitive advantage. Rarity was determined by checking if other competitors offer something similar and persistent customer demand. Imitability was determined by asking "Will it be expensive for other organizations to replicate or imitate?" Organization asks, "Does your business have solid systems, structures, and processes to exploit the advantage the resource or capability has?"

Table 2 Capabilities and Resources

Features / Resources	Value (is it valuable?)	Rarity (is it rare?)	Imitability (is it hard to imitate?)	Organization (are they organized around it?)	Recommendations
Parent Involvement	✓	X			Competitive Parity
Student Teacher Ratio (1:7)	✓	✓	✓	✓	Sustained Competitive Advantage

Safe Learning Environment	✓	✓	X		Temporary Competitive Advantage
Mentoring Program	✓	✓	✓	✓	Sustained Competitive Advantage
Flexible Curriculum	✓	✓	?	✓	Temporary Competitive Advantage?
Extracurricular Options	✓	✓	✓	X	Unused Competitive Advantage
Human Resources	✓	✓	X		Temporary Competitive Advantage
Competitive Pricing	✓	✓	✓	X	Unused Competitive Advantage
Propensity for Innovation	✓	✓	✓	✓	Competitive Advantage
Niche Market (2e)	✓	✓	✓	X	Unused Competitive Advantage
Customer Experience	✓	✓	X		Temporary Competitive Advantage
Leadership and Vision	✓	✓	✓	X	Unused Competitive Advantage
Marketing Communication	X				Competitive Disadvantage
Quality Product Offering	✓	X			Competitive Parity
After school programs (Band, Sports, etc.)	X				Competitive Disadvantage

If the resource or capability was identified as not having value to customers and other competitors were leveraging those resources and capabilities successfully, the framework implies that there is a competitive disadvantage. Marketing communications and customer outreach was,

by far, the most identified resource as being underutilized. Competitive Parity is when more than a few organizations have the same capability or use it similarly. The quality of the educational product offered by Sphinx Academy is on par with other programs, but above norm for their target customer. It is important that these resources and capabilities be maintained so that they do not become competitive disadvantages.

Capabilities and resources that can be easily imitated have a temporary competitive advantage. Human Resources are a temporary competitive advantage worth mentioning. Dr. Elghoroury has consistently found passionate talented educators, but none have stayed over three years because of the lack of benefits like healthcare and low salaries. So, although she finds amazing people who are well loved, the low financial resources available mean that they cannot be paid a competitive wage. Sphinx Academy students have launched a satellite with NASA, built furniture, learned Japanese, earned a pilot's license- and this is just the regular offerings because class availability is based on student interests and changes when student interest does. This is harder to imitate in larger organizations, but Sphinx is not organized to take advantage of this capability. Temporary competitive advantages must be utilized with more effort to help customers choose Sphinx Academy over other choices.

One of the rarest identified capabilities of the organization when I began this project was the individualized learning through an online platform. When the pandemic started, Sphinx Academy was more prepared than any other high school in the county. But when all schools went online, and education was forced to adapt and innovate that resource is now more imitable;

although there would have to be a real culture shift to implement that as policy. So, what was originally thought to have given Sphinx a sustained competitive advantage, is now questionable.

A 7:1 student to teacher ratio is a valuable capability that is rare and hard to imitate, and the organization is designed around the mentoring program and small class size and is identified as a sustained competitive advantage. The three capabilities that were fully utilized were student teacher ratio, the mentoring program, and ability to adapt or innovate. By understanding and promoting competitive advantages, Sphinx academy can gain a larger share of the customer market or more enrolled students.

Recommendations

As the intent and goal of this improvement study was to ultimately help support Sphinx Academy leaders in their efforts to revise strategies that support marketing, enrollment, and sustained engagement of school families, the following set of recommendations was developed to provide to Sphinx Academy leaders as they begin to move forward in their planning efforts. My recommendations are based on resources and capabilities that can be leveraged and those that put Sphinx Academy at a competitive disadvantage such as Marketing Communications and Customer Outreach. I have made the following recommendations:

Recommendation 1:

Define the organization's mission and develop a dedicated marketing strategy around their brand identity.

Sphinx Academy has a dedicated and involved parent base. The organization has an innovative educational model that is appealing to first adopters and has been a lifeline for parents whose children have failed to succeed in traditional schooling options. Parents often find Sphinx Academy after exhaustive searches or are aware of Sphinx Academy through their personal networks. Sphinx Academy parents are fatigued from having to explain their educational choice and have difficulty communicating what the organization is to non-Sphinx Academy parents because of the lack of marketing communication and brand identity.

The school's current mission statement communicated through their website and on social media is inconsistent. It is either "to create a customized, blended learning environment that enables our students to succeed", or "to customize the educational experience for each student to ensure that they are prepared for whatever comes next." This mission statement lacks clarity, uses unfamiliar terms to a general audience, such as "blended learning", and uses language that is non-descriptive. According to Gabriel & Farmer (2009), "developing strong vision and mission statements can help stakeholders in your school reach such a common understanding." By developing a strong vision and mission statement, Sphinx Academy can communicate the organization's aims and goals to stakeholders, as well as, to a general audience about what the Sphinx Academy is and what niche in the market they hope to reach. Stakeholders in the organization have a clear understanding of the students that benefit most in the educational environment created, but the students in the wider market are not being reached.

Efforts to find the target market and communicate Sphinx Academy by the organization have thus far been lacking. These efforts have been limited to an independent school fair at a top tier independent K-8 school populated with boarding school options and religious based independent schools and a booth at the Fayette County Science Fair where they are surrounded by local nature preserves such as the Salato Wildlife Center and summer engineering programs like Newton's Attic. Their marketing strategy was semi successful when the organization was founded and communicated through the home school network that Dr. Elghoroury belonged to but has been lacking in recent years as the original group of students have graduated and those parents have left those networks.

A dedicated marketing strategy using new venues, such as social media and creating relationships within public schools, to reach prospective parents is needed to sustain and/or increase enrollment numbers. I have established that the growing population of the Fayette and surrounding counties and the number of students in the area who would most benefit from Sphinx Academy's educational model exceed the stagnant enrollment numbers of the organization. A dedicated marketing strategy would help align the organizations outreach to the organizations goals to reach its target audience and lead to a more efficient use of resources to this aim.

Recommendation 2:

Sphinx Academy should leverage social media and their current network of parents to help reach their target market.

Stakeholders are aware that most parents find Sphinx Academy through a homeschool network of parents or word of mouth from current and former parents. There is little effort to maintain these networks or extend them into a larger audience. Those networks are diminishing and students and their parents move to higher education. With limited financial and human resources, social media is a free platform to reach their target audience and communicate the organization's brand identity. According to Statista (<https://www.statista.com>), 70% of the population of the United States has at least one social media account. In 2015, [MarketingSherpa](#) published a study that reported that 95% of 18-34 year old individuals are likely to follow brands on social media and that parents are more likely than non-parents to follow a brand. Social media is a viable way for Sphinx Academy to increase brand recognition and traffic to their website because their market is already there. More importantly for Sphinx Academy, marketing through social media is more cost effective than marketing through traditional means.

The organization's social media presence is stale. The Sphinx Academy twitter account has 13 followers and has not been posted on since 2015. The Sphinx Academy Facebook account has over 600 likes and follows with 4 posts in 2021 thus far and 36 posts total for 2020. Most of the posts are pictures of students with little context and rarely are commented, liked, or shared. The organization does not use any of the backend digital marketing tools to analyze engagement or promote posts and does not use search engine optimization (SEO) to direct traffic to their website or resources available.

Parents using their social network to choose a school and most of that network is online.

Parents also use social media to inform them on school choices. A strong online presence and brand can help parents consider a school. Sphinx Academy lacks brand awareness and presence on social media to reach its target audience.

Recommendation 3a:

Sphinx Academy should differentiate themselves from the key competitor while highlighting what makes them an attractive secondary school option to parents.

Sphinx Academy's primary competitor is the KORE Academy. Both organizations use a blended learning platform and 1:1 instruction to cater to students with LD. Sphinx Academy has a more challenging curriculum with Advanced Placement (AP) opportunities that are more appealing to parents with LD students who are higher functioning and are looking at higher education. Despite having a similar mission and educational style as the KORE Academy, the educational programming of Sphinx Academy is more suited to a different niche in the market. This differentiation is key for Sphinx to reach its target customer. A clear communication of what sets Sphinx Academy apart will help define its brand and differentiate itself from its key competitor.

Recommendation 3b:

Sphinx Academy should leverage their unique extracurricular programs and should advertise how their mentoring program is an integral compliment to their customized learning plan.

Compared to other small independent schools and programs, Sphinx Academy succeeds in its individualized educational programming and range of extracurricular educational offerings. The mentoring program is most highly touted among the organization and the parents acknowledge the residual effects of the program without understanding that Sphinx Academy has implemented something unique. The extracurricular educational offerings are lauded by parents but not communicated to a wider audience. The ability to be flexible and innovative in what they offer outside of standardized instruction based on student interests is a draw especially for their tuition costs to highlight a value added not available at any other secondary school. These are missed opportunities to create sustained competitive advantages for the organization and need to be communicated to highlight the organization and differentiate Sphinx Academy from competitors.

By leveraging the capabilities and resources identified as potential for a sustained competitive advantage in the market, the organization can reinforce its brand identity and gain a larger recognition in the market amongst competitors while differentiating the educational opportunities they offer versus what is offered at other schools.

Implications

Qualitative data from stakeholders and community members gives school administrators a broad view of perceptions that may identify the vulnerabilities and opportunities with the high choice landscape of secondary education in Fayette County. Administrators can use knowledge to identify mission and marketing opportunities for an already innovative and niche educational offering to compete for parents and students that would benefit from the services offered at Sphinx Academy. Organizational change could correlate to perceptions and create customized strategies for outreach. Further research can be done to assess strategy effectiveness.

Limitations

Due to COVID, the school's future was uncertain until fall enrollment. Fortunately, Sphinx Academy was prepared to continue operating through remote learning.

Some respondents may have been uncomfortable in sharing their perspectives because I worked at an independent K-8 school in Fayette County at the time of the data collection.

Interview participation was limited to families that chose Sphinx Academy for at least 1 of their children, employees, and Board members. Some interview participation was limited due to time constraints and stress with adjusting to home learning. COVID-19 required that after March 1st they were conducted via video call.

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Appendix A: Interview Templates and Guides

Informal Interview Questions and Director's Interview

The focus on customer preference in the framework led to most researchers relying mostly on customers who had chosen the service or had terminated the service for an alternative. Interviews are designed to discover how customers chose Sphinx academy by identifying critical factors.

During the interviews, the focus will be directed to:

1. The critical factors that led the interviewee to choose Sphinx Academy.
2. What were the limitations.
3. What alternatives were chosen or considered.

Informal Interview Template

INTRODUCTION TO YOUR PARTICIPANT

Hi and thanks for participating in this interview. We are going to ask you a few questions about your recent decision to enroll your student in The Sphinx Academy. There are no right or wrong answers, we are just trying to get your story in your own words. At certain times, we will dive deep and ask detailed questions about a situation. You can think of it like we are filming a documentary and we are trying to set the scene and get all the details right for a closeup. Any questions? Great! Let us begin.

INTERVIEW SCRIPT

Start with the moment of decision and ask detailed questions about it to activate the interviewee's memory.

- When did you decide to enroll your student?
- Where were you?
- Was it during the day or at night, cold or hot outside?
- Was anyone with you?
- How did you choose The Sphinx Academy?

Try to find out more about the first thought about the choice to enroll. Note down all significant moments along the way.

- When was the first time you thought: I need to find a new solution?
- What made you think about it?

Find out about the other choices the interviewee has considered along the way (build the consideration set).

- How did you find out about Sphinx Academy?
- Did you try other solutions? What kind of solutions were they?

Interview Template for the Director

Interview Questions

1. Who are your major competitors? How do you know this?
2. What is your opinion of the schools that you compete with or against? In terms of quality, program offerings, price?
3. Why do you think most students attend Sphinx Academy?

4. How does your school attract students? Do you advertise? Do you know where? Do you know if these ads are effective in recruiting students?
5. How important is advertising to your recruitment of new students? What is your opinion of how well the ads align with what you deliver?
6. Do you have a specific objective in your program that you advertise as a best practice?
7. Do you have an independent school strategy regarding competing with other schools? Can you describe what that is? How do you know this? Is it written somewhere? What role did you play in developing this?
8. How directly did you or your school consider the competition, in the formation of your independent school strategy? Can you tell me how this shows up in your strategy? How much does competition matter to your school? How do you know this? Where is this talked about? Are there differing views on this?
9. In what ways do you think you are you better than the competition? In what ways do you fall short?