

Washington-Ireland Program
Alumni Network

Strategic Plan
2005-2007

Agenda for Action

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Mission Statement

The purpose of this document is to identify the strategic objectives, action points and structural arrangements supporting the activities of the Washington Ireland Program Alumni Network from 2005-2007.

The Strategic Plan is based on the following mission statement:

The Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network will strengthen the sense of community between Washington-Ireland Program alumni, support the Washington-Ireland Program & promote public service and leadership by facilitating the ventures of its alumni.

1.2 Background

The Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network is an association of graduates of the Washington-Ireland Program, originally called the Young Leaders Program. The Young Leaders Program was an eight-week program of personal and professional development for young people born on the island of Ireland, granting these students the opportunity to live, work and study in Washington DC, through internship placements, leadership training and a host family homestay.

An alumni network for graduates of the Program, called Horizons Alumni, was officially established in 2001, and also included graduates of a sister Program called Project Children. The alumni network's vision was to empower the graduates into 'bringing something home', by offering them a mutual springboard for their ideas and inspirations. In 2002, it was decided that each program should have its own alumni network, and the Horizons brand was retained by the Young Leaders Program graduates.

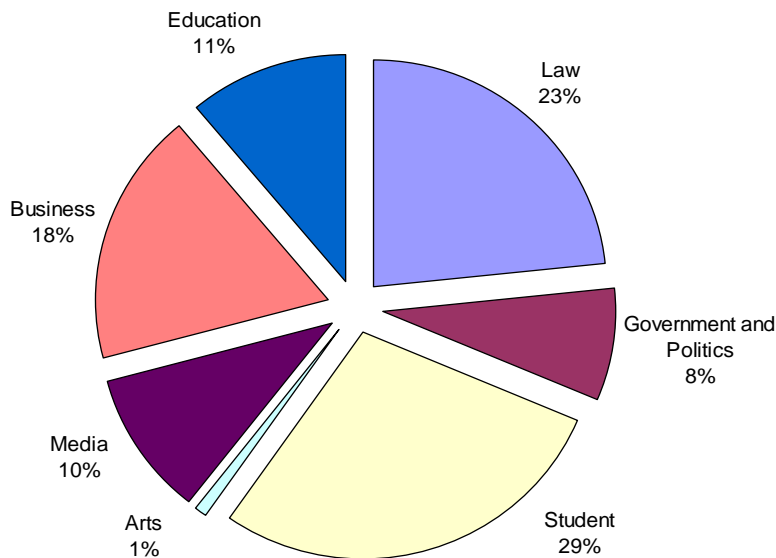
Later that year, the Young Leaders Program was developed into a six-month program to include practical service in Northern Ireland and Ireland and was re-named The Washington-Ireland Program for Service and Leadership (WIP). To reflect this, alumni voted in October 2004 to rename the Alumni Network to the Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network (WIPAN).

WIPAN now aspires to be the most innovative and successful organisation of its kind on the island of Ireland. In doing so, it is our intention to ensure that membership of WIPAN is just as rewarding and prestigious as the Washington-Ireland Program – at least one common experience that all alumni share! The hope and expectation of this strategic plan is to take the dreams and great ideas of the alumni and, through WIPAN, create structures to make them reality.

1.3 Current Status of Alumni

There are over three hundred alumni of the Washington-Ireland Program. These graduates are emerging as leaders in many different areas. The current breakdown of alumni is as follows:

WIP Graduates, by Profession - 2005



As well as close personal and professional relationships, in the last four years alumni have organised and facilitated an impressive array of events and projects. These include:

- Washington-Ireland Program support 2001-present
- the Youth Empowerment Scheme 2001-present
- Annual Thanksgiving events 2001-present
- Social events for alumni, Belfast, Dublin and London, 2001-present
- Development of website 2003-present
- Seminars with students from American University on Conflict Resolution 2003-04
- Conference X 2004
- the Horizons Expo 2004-present
- YES International 2004

These serve to illustrate the enormous potential that the Alumni Network can realise, when inspired into action.

1.4 Motivation

This strategic plan is aimed at injecting a renewed sense of spirit and direction into the Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network, and developing WIPAN into an effective forum, where the vision set out by the Washington-Ireland Program to “bring leadership and active citizenship home” can be continued. WIPAN believes it can make a lasting contribution to this challenge through the promotion of public service and leadership on the island of Ireland, where many young people continue to avoid rather than engage in these principles.

The strategic plan, complemented by the re-branding process, offers a coherent and professional framework for alumni projects and activities in the future. The solid framework that it will offer will increase the collective impact of the alumni body and inspire more confidence in the alumni to initiate and participate in projects. Ultimately the strategic plan will enable WIPAN to grow and support the Washington-Ireland Program, rather than depend on it. A successful alumni network will further legitimise the Washington-Ireland Program and its vision, and indeed is critical to the continued funding of the Program.

2. Situation Analysis

The Strategic Plan is based on an analysis of the environment in which WIPAN operates, considering both external and internal factors..

2.1 Internal Factors

WIPAN distinguishes itself from other organisations because of its unique membership base. The network is comprised of almost 300 members, drawn from all parts of the island of Ireland, all of whom have attended, or are attending, college and who have all shared the unique experience of participating on the Washington-Ireland Program. The array of projects organised and facilitated by alumni to date, including innovative alumni ventures such as Youth Empowerment Scheme (YES) and the Horizons Expo, launched by *An Taoiseach* Bertie Ahern, are a testament to the spirit of enterprise among the graduates.

Therefore one of WIPAN's strongest assets is its membership base. Alumni have a wealth of skills and knowledge that they can bring to WIPAN. Increasingly many alumni are moving into positions of influence in a number of arenas in the island of Ireland and beyond.

In the past a challenge for WIPAN has been to identify the precise role and purpose of the alumni network. Formal engagement of alumni in the Network and attendance at Network events has often been below expectations. There has sometimes been a high expectation on previous Executives without an appropriate support base in place. Additionally, there has tended to be some uncertainty regarding how the Alumni Network relates to the Washington Ireland Program. These difficulties have been overcome in recent years but moving forward a wider cross-section of alumni must still be engaged. This is particularly significant given the evolving nature of the Washington Ireland Program, the future of which increasingly lies in the hands of its Alumni Network.

2.2 External Factors

The external environment impacting upon WIPAN is driven by the following policy, economic, social, cultural and technological factors.

- The political environment is of great relevance to WIPAN. Improved relations between the two jurisdictions on the island of Ireland place WIPAN in a significant position. In the Republic of Ireland, the Government recognises that one of the main challenges is to get young people interested in the national political dialogue. In Northern Ireland, the principles of democracy and citizenship continue to face obstacles. WIPAN's objectives present clear opportunities for a positive contribution to this reality.
- Economically, there are threats and opportunities arising from increased material well-being on the island. As Ireland becomes richer, it becomes increasingly difficult for the Washington-Ireland Program to raise funds in the USA. Nonetheless, domestic prosperity brings with it new funding opportunities from both statutory and non-statutory sources. The North-South political dimension, in particular, is backed strongly with resources, and this is a pivotal potential source of key funding for WIPAN in the coming years.

- Socially and culturally, young people in the 18-35 age bracket are being afforded opportunities to have their voices heard now more than ever, presenting clear opportunities for WIPAN. In particular, WIPAN can provide a vital role for young people interested in getting involved in the civil society sector.

- Technologically, the past decade has seen huge progress in communication and the dissemination of information across long distances. The Washington-Ireland Program swiftly recognised the potential of these developments at the turn of the millennium, developing a first-class website and web journals. This is a critical resource for WIPAN, particularly given the increasing spread of alumni across the globe. Moving forward WIPAN will ensure that it remains on top of technological developments and that its website and email communications are up-to-date and relevant.

3. Key Strategies

The five objectives that will be the focus of WIPAN's strategic direction for the next three years are outlined below. They are the result of a process of analysis and consultation with alumni and stakeholders, outlined in Appendix 1. They represent the philosophy underpinning WIPAN activities and thus form the basis and structure of the action points described in Section 4.

3.1 *Connected Alumni*

For WIPAN to succeed, it must have a real presence in the everyday life of its members. Furthermore, there must be tangible benefits to being active for the alumni, from professional development to social engagement. Membership of WIPAN should be just as rewarding and prestigious as the Washington-Ireland Program – at least one common experience that all alumni share.

3.2 *A Stronger Network*

The idea of a stronger network revolves around both the professionalisation of WIPAN and the raising of its profile. Professionalizing WIPAN means facing the current situation in terms of resources i.e. no staff, no offices, no computers and a limited financial resource base. At present, our main resource is the Washington-Ireland Program Office in Belfast. Over the course of the strategic plan, the operating framework available to WIPAN must be developed.

3.3 *Washington-Ireland Program Support*

The overriding aim of WIPAN's relationship with the Washington Ireland Program is to contribute to its development; hence a key strategy - and one of its greatest successes to date - is Program Support. There are three main elements to this:

- i. Mentoring Program
- ii. Recruitment
- iii. Launch of WIP each year

The continued activity and strengthening of WIPAN also provides an indirect form of support to WIP. A stronger network can lead to a stronger program, and vice versa.

Alumni Support

Ultimately, WIPAN is a “public service and leadership” resource network. The true barometer of its success is in the ventures of its alumni. During 2005-2007, WIPAN will, in particular, support the Youth Empowerment Scheme and Horizons Expo.

Further Alumni ventures may be developed during the course of the Strategic Plan and the guiding principle of the relationship between the WIPAN Exec and these will be the same as for YES and the Horizons Expo, i.e. each venture is responsible for setting up its own management structures, as well as its own business and strategic plans; the WIPAN Exec is there to lend support through access to the broader network, administrative support where possible and bank accounts where necessary. Each alumni venture should report at Exec meetings.

3.4 *Financing*

One of WIPAN’s key objectives is to become financially stable.

Income for administration and support will come from a mixture of designated funds from the parent Program and direct fundraising. Additionally, applications for funding will be made to the existing database of Trusts and Foundations at the Network’s disposal.

The Network will also liaise with the Program regarding possibilities for corporate sponsorship through employers’ associations, commercial enterprises and Chambers of Commerce, where relevant. The long-term goal for the Network should be achieving charity status, and thus the first important step in this regard is investigating establishment as a company limited by guarantee.

4. Strategic Action Points

The following strategic action points are designed to achieve each strategic objective. They are also designed to offer a high visibility year-round calendar of activities.

4.1 *Connected Alumni*

Over the period of the strategic plan online communication will be the main component to ensure alumni stay connected, as it represents both the most efficient method and the most cost effective means of connecting alumni. This will comprise:

- i. monthly e-newsletters, which will continue to be the main form of contact between the Executive and the general membership
- ii. fortnightly website updates and direct monthly e-mail contact from the Executive, key methods of informing alumni of the latest developments for WIPAN
- iii. a message board system on the WIPAN website to regularise contact and communication between alumni regardless of geographical location
- iv. a class representative system, to maintain formal and informal contact amongst WIP 'classes' and contact to the wider alumni network
- v. an annual written pack, sent to the houses of alumni with AGM notices and officer reports, summarising the last year's activities

4.2 *A Stronger Network*

- i. Securing regular part-time office space for the WIPAN Exec, for meetings, web updates and communications with alumni
- ii. A system of Honorary Patronage, linking WIPAN with key high-profile public figures, is to be established. Over the coming years, it will be the responsibility of the Chair to approach appropriate candidates, upon recommendation of the Exec following consultation with wider alumni, and to award the title of Honorary Patron of the Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network. Through this, WIPAN will raise its profile in the wider domain and vastly improve its prospects of financial sustainability.
- iii. In relation to raising our profile, WIPAN will develop its external relations by strengthening its links with external stakeholders and other relevant parties, such as potential public and private sources of funding, politicians, journalists and those involved in high-level decision-making. The PRO will maintain consistent and relevant contact with these parties, through a series of biennial Briefing Papers, so that they are fully aware of the activities of WIPAN, and will monitor the existing database of external stakeholders.

4.3 *Washington-Ireland Program Support*

- i. WIPAN aims to formalise the support it gives to the Washington-Ireland Program in its recruitment process. This involves the development and maintenance of a schedule and roster of Program support in early January each year, encompassing (a) information nights, (b) university presentations, (c) interviews and (d) the induction and re-entry weekends.
- ii. Maintaining the Peer Mentoring Program each summer, from April to September, The purpose of this is to nurture class members and ensure they are fully aware of the potential for them to remain involved in public service, and in particular with WIPAN, after their graduation.
- iii. In coordination with the Washington-Ireland Program Belfast Office, WIPAN will develop the Thanksgiving event as the launch of the Washington-Ireland Program for the following year. Each year, the opening of applications for the following year's Program will be marked by a keynote address by one of our Honorary Patrons, or a similar high-profile guest. American Scholars and students will be invited to attend the celebration of ties between the USA and the island of Ireland.
- iv. WIPAN will create a scholarship fund for students in financial hardship selected for the Washington-Ireland Program. This has been a long-standing desire of alumni of the program, and will help to ensure that the program retains diversity in future years, one of its most treasured characteristics.

4.4 *Alumni Support*

- i. Creation and appointment of Events manager on the Executive whose responsibility is to co-ordinate the various alumni venture events in the WIPAN calendar.
- ii. Liaise with the YES Board on a memorandum of understanding for the period 2006-2008. WIPAN will aim to assist the YES team with the maintenance of the Belfast project and look at developing the scheme in other cities using suitably placed alumni. Obtaining the necessary funding to make YES secure is vital to this aim. In particular, WIPAN can offer YES access to the pool of alumni, while YES offers to WIPAN a solid example of the potential of alumni to engage in projects of real value.
- iii. Liaise with the Horizons Expo Project Team on a memorandum of understanding for the period 2006-2008. WIPAN will work with the Horizons Expo team to make the Horizons Expo a key event in the promotion of public service and active citizenship on the island of Ireland. Building on the successes of the initial Expo and the multitude of contacts that it gave WIPAN across the civil society sector, WIPAN will assist with the expansion of the Horizons Expo into colleges across the island, on an annual basis.
- iv. Support to other alumni ventures as they arise, along the same principles as the relationships with YES and the Horizons Expo.

4.5 Financing

- i. Establishment of bank accounts by end-2005
- ii. Investigation the feasibility of establishing WIPAN as a company limited by guarantee by end-2005. If agreed upon, a working group of 2 Exec members and 2 WIP alumni currently working in the legal sector will be established with a view to accomplishing this by June 2006.
- iii. Application for funding from three foundations for particular events/projects by February 2006. The Executive will form a sub-committee of interested alumni who work in the appropriate sectors to assist the Executive in making these applications.
- iv. Annual Membership subscriptions from alumni to be actively pursued – the current subscription is set at £10.00 per year.
- v. Hosting of fundraising events in Belfast, London and Dublin on a bi-annual basis.

5. Governance & Structures

In order for WIPAN to achieve its five key strategic objectives, changes within its governance and structure are necessary. These changes are designed to ensure that WIPAN develops flexibly and, that the alumni can engage with WIPAN regardless of geographic location. They are also suggested bearing in mind the long-term goal of achieving charitable status.

5.1 Committee Structure

The proposed new structure for WIPAN has as its centrepiece an Executive, with seven Officers and at least five Ordinary Members. The Officers are: Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, Treasurer, Public Relations Officer, Events Manager and Web Officer. Ideally, the incoming Chair will have either maintained a committee position previously or demonstrated a track record of involvement in alumni initiatives. This preference is necessary to ensure that an incoming Chair has a realistic understanding of the key issues facing WIPAN at any given time, and is familiar with key stakeholders and other alumni members.

Ordinary members will include the four regional Representatives (Northern Ireland, Republic of Ireland, England/Wales and Scotland). The Executive can also appoint additional members as provided for in the Constitution. Quorum will be the attendance of at least four Officers.

5.2 Role of the Executive & its Officers

The Executive has a collective responsibility to ensure the timely and efficient implementation of the strategic plan, in cooperation with its membership base. The primary tasks of each member of the Executive, and therefore the main areas on which they are to report at each Executive meeting, shall be as follows:

The Chair shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. External relations with WIP/WIPAN supporters and stakeholders, the American-Irish and Irish-American communities and with like-minded organisations on the island of Ireland
2. Liaising with the Boards in Belfast and Washington and with the Program managers
3. Maintaining relations with Honorary Patrons and securing new suitable candidates
4. Fundraising for WIPAN, with particular attention to increasing resource capacity
5. Reporting back on above to alumni

The Vice-Chair shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. Co-ordination of all regional chapters, and ensuring that proper regional structures are in place

2. Development of peer support and the mentoring Program
3. Fundraising for WIPAN, in conjunction with the Chair

The Secretary shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. Administrative support and communication within Executive
2. Co-ordinating database of plans of action and ensuring that deadlines are met by those responsible
3. Dissemination of Executive's minutes to stakeholders and alumni
4. Co-ordinating alumni for recruitment drive alongside Belfast based Development Manager

The Treasurer shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. Financial probity and accounting
2. Timely refunding of incurred expenses

The Public Relations Officer shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. Co-ordination of communications to alumni through Representatives for each class
2. Internal communications, in particular the monthly newsletter
3. External communications across the wide variety of Network stakeholders
4. The active pursuit of website content related to WIP and WIPAN. This will involve writing and editing stories, taking or requesting pictures be taken at WIP/WIPAN events, and encouraging alumni to contribute to the website
5. Management of the alumni and stakeholder databases
6. Monitoring of technological developments to ensure that communications are up-to-date and relevant. This will occur jointly with the Web Officer.

The Events Manager (new role) shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. Co-ordination of Year Round Calendar. The Events manager will work with the Executive and regional structures to ensure that special events are planned, managed and executed effectively.
2. Liaison with appointed committees for ventures such as YES and Horizons Expo. The manager will provide Network support to these ventures and will report back to the Executive on progress and matters arising.

The Web Officer shall have as her/his primary responsibilities:

1. The maintenance and development of website. This will occur in cooperation with the PRO.
2. The creation and maintenance of an appropriate and viable 'message board' system to connect alumni, and a facility for alumni blogs, if feasible.
3. Website content, in conjunction with the Web Officer
4. The monitoring of technological developments to ensure that communications are up-to-date and relevant. This will occur jointly with the PRO.

5.3 Regional Chapters & Class Representatives

The heads of four main Regional Chapters – Northern Ireland [new], Republic of Ireland, England/Wales and Scotland – will sit on the Executive as Ordinary members. These regional coordinators will be responsible for:

- i. Keeping an up-to-date list of members of their Chapter,
- ii. Acting as a focal point for information to go from the Executive to the members and from the Chapter to the Executive
- iii. Organising regional events (including social activities) as the Chapter sees fit, with a minimum of six events (of any size) per year for the four main Chapters

For each year of the Washington Ireland Program, there will also be a representative appointed each year. Their primary responsibility will be to email their year in relation to forthcoming WIPAN events and to organise travel/accommodation among the group where necessary.

5.4 Key Relationships

WIPAN has a small number of key relationships that must be well managed over the course of the Strategic Plan. These include:

- i. The Washington-Ireland Program: The overriding aim of WIPAN's relationship with the program is to contribute to its development; hence one of the pillars of WIPAN activities is Program Support. It will do this as is set out in the Strategic Objective 'Program Support' above. The Belfast-based Development Manager will report at Executive meetings, to ensure coherence between the Program and WIPAN. WIPAN does not have sole responsibility to fundraise for the Program – this is the prerogative of the Ireland Board. Nonetheless, WIPAN will help where it can, particularly through being active as a stronger Network.
- ii. The Ireland and DC Boards of WIP: Currently, in addition to three other alumni chosen by the Program itself, the Chair of the Alumni Network sits *ex officio* on the Ireland Board and reports at its meetings. Whenever possible, the Chair will also report at meetings of the DC Board. The Secretary will also circulate the minutes from Executive meetings to the Chairs of both Boards to pass on to their respective members.
- iii. Host families, based in the Washington area, are another key constituency for WIPAN. Communication with them will be done on a bi-monthly basis through an email from the Chair, with relevant information on recent WIPAN development, and with links to the latest newsletters.
- iv. Honorary Patrons: The Chair will maintain contact and relations with all Honorary Patrons, and – in conjunction with the PRO – keep them informed of relevant developments in WIPAN and the Program.

6. Monitoring & Implementation

The first responsibility of each new session of the Alumni Network must be the drafting of:

- i. a plan of action for the year ahead, reflecting the strategic aims of the Network
- ii. a plan of implementation across each strategic objective

Each Executive meeting held should use as its template for the agenda the specific responsibilities of the various Officers, to ensure both that the workload is being fairly distributed in line with expectations and that the plan of action set out is being achieved.

Evaluation should also take place at a mid-way point in May 2006. This should be an independent evaluation of progress to date, focussed on producing a short report to make constructive recommendations on how to achieve outstanding objectives. This should be conducted by a team consisting of approximately four people:

- i. representatives from the alumni, such as a previous chair plus two other graduates
- ii. representatives from the WIP team, ideally the development manager
- iii. in consultation with an external adviser, who may lead the exercise on a pro-bono basis

7. Conclusion

WIPAN aspires to be the most innovative and successful organisation of its kind on the island of Ireland. This strategic plan is the first step on that road. It is aimed at injecting a renewed sense of spirit and direction into the Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network, and developing WIPAN into an effective forum, where the vision set out by the Washington-Ireland Program to “bring leadership and active citizenship home” can be continued.

To secure the success of the strategic plan, it is vital that the entire alumni network fully embraces the rationale and the objectives of this strategic plan, and follows through with the five key strategies. It is only an engaged and motivated network that can achieve the ultimate goal to take the dreams and great ideas of the alumni and, through WIPAN, create structures to make them reality.

**“The Washington-Ireland Program Alumni Network will
strengthen the sense of community between Washington-Ireland Program alumni,
support the Washington-Ireland Program
& promote public service and leadership by facilitating the ventures of its alumni.”**

Appendix 1: Development of the Strategic Plan

After the 2004 AGM, the Executive created a Strategic Planning Committee with the following terms of reference:

- i. To devise both a strategic plan, in consultation with relevant WIP stakeholders, and an implementation plan;
- ii. To present a first draft to the WIPAN Executive and finalise the strategic plan pending a recommendation from WIPAN Executive.

The Committee consisted of Colin Andrews (2002), Chris Brown (2002), Ronan Lyons (2002) and Paula McKernan (2003).

The strategic planning committee worked for three months consulting with alumni and stakeholders. This consultation consisted of:

- i. alumni focus group meetings in Belfast, Dublin and London
- ii. interviews with the Executive Director, the Belfast Development Manager and Chairs of the Boards of the Washington-Ireland Program (US and Ireland)
- iii. interviews with government officials, potential funders and likeminded organisations
- iv. a focus group meeting of interested parties in Washington DC, where Board members, host families, those offering office internships and funders were all in attendance

Analysis of the findings was conducted during the months of December 2004 and January 2005, and was vital to the development of this plan. The final element of consultation took place during the period February to April 2005 and consisted of final comments and suggested reviews from alumni members. These comments and revisions were then collated and, where possible, worked into the Strategic Plan.

Final revisions took place following the election of the 2005/06 WIPAN Executive and their contributions.