First, thank you for being interested enough to open this letter. **If you are interested in joining GaCo, please read all of it, carefully.**

The most important thing to understand is that GaCo is more than just a robotics team. We do build and compete with robots, but in the big picture of things that’s only a part of what we do. Out of a team of about thirty students only a fraction, less than one half, have anything to do with our robot we use for competition, and then, even half of them actually have anything to do with the actual robot build. This year, our team will be celebrating its fourteenth year. In those fourteen years we have been blessed to have advanced to the **FIRST** Championship, at the world level, twelve of those years. Only one of those years we actually advanced because of solely winning a regional competition with our robot. The remaining eleven we advanced due to being the recipient of awards that really have nothing to do with our robot. Twice, however, we double qualified by also winning a regional competition with our robot.

So if we are not all about robots, what are we really about?

What GaCo is really about is passion and **vision**. Passion for all things STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math.) Passion and enthusiasm enough that we want spread to everyone we have the opportunity to meet. Our vision is for every student, in and about, Garrett County to be something we call “STEM Ready.” That is to have had the opportunity before leaving elementary school to have fully develop those foundational skills required for their success in STEM. Our “mission field” is elementary school students. Everything we do, we do to support our vision. Whatever we do with robots is just a method (or strategy) to help bring about our vision. We measure our success - not by what we happen to win, but by the difference we make in regard to our vision.

GaCo students are busy. We meet year round, at the very least, the first and third Monday evenings of every month. In addition, multiple GaCo events are scheduled every month, Saturdays, Sundays, many holidays, days off and evenings.

As a result GaCo students are those who, first and foremost, have passion. A passion for all things STEM and a passion for sharing with others, willing to put others before themselves. GaCo students are expected to commit to **FRC** as one of the top five priorities in their lives. That means if there is a GaCo function or event, GaCo students are expected to be present provided it does not conflict with any of the other four priorities. Staying home, not participating in a GaCo event just because you don’t feel like it is not acceptable. If you are sick, or there is another priority that takes precedence, we more than understand and hope you can join us next time. We encourage our students to be involved with other extracurricular activities such as band, varsity sports, student council, etc. As a result it takes everyone doing what they can in order to make GaCo work.

GaCo students are expected to mentor students on other robotic teams. **FIRST** Robotics has four age-leveled programs: **FIRST LEGO League, Jr (FLL Jr), FIRST LEGO League (FLL),**
FIRST Tech Challenge (FTC), and FIRST Robotics Challenge (FRC) - of which, GaCo is one of 3,500 FRC teams world wide. In Garrett County this year, there are twelve FLL teams, four FLL Jr teams, five FTC teams, of which, GaCo helps to support as well as many teams surrounding Garrett County. Twenty-five percent of our budget (much of what we fundraise) goes directly to support these teams - not to meet any of our own expenses for travel, etc. We do this entirely to support our vision.

The other important thing to realize about GaCo that our mentors, coaches and partners are volunteers. Not only do they not get paid, in addition to their time, they often support the team financially. Many have been with GaCo since our team started fourteen years ago. This letter, for example, is being written at 10:00 at night - voluntarily! Since they have invested so much of themselves in the program, we owe it to our mentors, coaches and partners (as well as our alumni and current students who have helped build the program) to hold high expectations for our students, specifically we look for students who (at the very least):

- show their passion for everything STEM. This can be demonstrated by at least two years of successful experience on a FLL or FTC team or by teacher recommendation - preferably a teacher who also volunteers as a GaCo mentor or coach.
- are willing to make FRC one of the top five priorities in their lives as evidenced by attending at least 60% of GaCo’s meeting, activities and events.
- willing to demonstrate GaCo’s core values as well as FIRST core values at all times.
- must maintain at least a GPA of 3.50 with no grade on report cards below a 75%.
- willing to sacrifice weekends, most holidays and evenings to attend GaCo events as well as other days “off” from school that teachers might have to work. Every effort will be taken to keep time out of classes to a minimum. This is especially true for underclassmen.
- have the parent support to get them to team meetings and events other than competitions and events requiring overnight stay. Parents are essential for the team’s success - especially in fundraising.
- be responsible for raising at least $500 through team fundraising efforts each year.
- abide by all rules, policy and procedure as prescribed by the Garrett County Board of Education for extracurricular and school sponsored programs.
- able to join with GaCo in June (of the year they wish to join) and must join prior to their junior year. Many reasons for this.

Please understand that we hold these high expectations not to keep anyone out, but to protect the investment, time and effort others have made in order to build the program to what it is today. Often, students are recruited based on their skillset to help GaCo realize its vision. We need students with a variety of skill sets, not only those specific to STEM, but those who can help tell our story through their writing, graphic design and communication skills, those who can
increase our capacity through entrepreneurship and organizational skills as well as those who have a passion for sharing what they know with others. If they know how to turn a screwdriver, read a multimeter or code in Java, all the better, but the most important thing we expect is passion, enthusiasm, and concern for others.

Like everything else in life, what you get out of something is largely proportional to what you put into it - and GaCo is no different. At competitions and other events that require overnight stays, students often wake up by 5:30am, ready to leave the hotel by 7:00am and once back at the hotel (usually after 8:00pm) students are expected to attend a mandatory study group to keep up with their regular schoolwork before they return to their rooms by 10:30. But somehow we manage to field a team, compete, share and have fun at the same time. Sometimes, it happens that we are recognized and awarded for what we do. But the most rewarding is to see the look of enlightenment in a third grader’s eyes when they "get" or understand a key concept in STEM or a smile of enthusiasm and confidence on a fave of an eleven year old - that you are responsible for… that is a GaCo student’s true reward and what GaCo is all about.

There are other FIRST “robotics” options other than GaCo. If a student is looking for just some experience with robotics, thanks to our school system and GaCo along with other organization such as GEARs there are emerging lots of opportunity to participant on FTC teams at the middle and high school level with hopefully lots more to come. Make no mistake about it - when it comes to robotics, FTC can be just as challenging and rewarding as FRC. And, there’s nothing wrong with that. Many colleges and potential employers look for applicants with any experience in a FIRST program. In addition, there are many FIRST scholarships available regardless of the program - FTC or FRC.

Hope this letter helps explain what GaCo is all about. It is just a glimpse of all what we do and how we make a difference. **Again, we measure our success - not by what we happen to win, but by the difference we make.** If you are interested in joining up with GaCo or any other FIRST program in Garrett County or have questions about the program, please contact chuck.trautwein@garrettcountyschools.org. In addition, GaCo team meetings on the first and third Mondays of every month are open to all interested and would be a wonderful time to learn more about GaCo's program and FIRST robotics.

Thanks for your interest!

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