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## Success as an Honors Program Director: What Does it Take?

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BRUCE FOX

# Success as an Honors Program Director: What Does it Take?

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What does it mean to succeed as an honors director? For the purposes of this discussion, I define the successful honors director as someone who builds an honors program, with “build” having a variety of meanings. In this context, “build” can mean starting a program from the get-go, reinvigorating a dormant program, increasing enrollment in an existing program (without decreasing the program’s value to students), increasing the program’s reputation, increasing its budget or other resources, increasing the value a program has to its university, or most importantly (at least to me) increasing the value of the program to its students. As you can see, my definition is quite encompassing. Perhaps a more satisfying, but certainly an even less precise, definition of what it mean to build a program is that the director makes the program better.

Given the above definition, what skills must an honors director have to succeed? Rew Godow has provided us with a comprehensive list of the skills he feels the ideal director should possess. He provides good inspirational goals for all of us. However, at the risk of academic parsing, I offer up for your consideration additional skills for an ideal director to have, many of which refine those posed by Godow. In addition to these skills, I include here one character trait essential for the success of any director.

In terms of skills, a director must be a quick study, especially if hired from outside the institution. A director needs to have the skills to rapidly assess the strengths and weaknesses of a program’s structure, its curriculum, and its faculty. Although any director, and especially an outside director, will have the proverbial “honeymoon” period, this period of grace disappears quickly. Institutions hire directors to lead programs, not to say “I haven’t been here very long, so I can’t really comment on that.” Yes, a quick study.

Second, a director must have political astuteness. A successful director quickly learns the institution’s culture and who really has power and influence. The successful director has a level of astuteness such that knowledge of the institution increases at a rate equal to or greater than the rate of decrease in the honeymoon period of grace.

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Associated with this astuteness, a successful director must have the skills to serve as a strong advocate for the program. Such a skill will bring prominence to the honors program without the program or its director winding up as the “tall poppy” at the institution.

Third, a director must have a subset of Godow’s social planning skills—event-planning skills. From convocations to award ceremonies to symposia to academic celebrations, honors programs often have the lead role in planning and implementing large-scale university events. As academics, most of us did not include event-planning coursework in our programs of study. I wish I had. On-the-job training can be exciting but nerve wracking. Although larger programs may have sufficient staff with event-planning skills, many programs do not. Having the skills to create successful events of this type, either directly or through leadership and management, will well serve any director.

Fourth, a successful director must learn how to say “No” forcefully but with diplomacy. A successful director will have a variety of abilities—organizational, relational, technical, and personal—highly valued in any organization. As a result, a director—or indeed any faculty or staff member having such a set of abilities—will frequently receive a call to serve as the chair of Committee X, as a member of Task Force A, as the facilitator of Community Meeting Y, or in some other service role. Given the position and prominence of honors programs, the director often receives such requests from a provost or president. Clearly directors must delicately craft such refusals. But at some point, such refusals must occur. To accept them all would leave little or no time to run the honors program—or to have a life.

However, the most important skill that a successful director must have is not a skill at all. Indeed, it is a personal character trait. Call it “Integrity.” Call it “Incorruptibility.” Call it “Mean what you say, and say what you mean.” Call it “Walking the talk.” Whatever the moniker, this trait, generally advocated and admired in the abstract, poses great danger to the program and its director. The “stand up” director easily becomes that “tall poppy” subject to the tender—or not so tender—ministrations of a sharp—or not so sharp—scythe. We often receive counsel to “get along” or “this is not worth fighting over,” wise and practical advice. Yet these words often lie uncomfortably in the ear and on the mind. When is “getting along” merely expediency? When is “not worth fighting for” really just cowardice? I wish I had the answer—or even **an** answer.

However, the words of Winston Churchill provide me with some guidance: “Never give in, never give in, never, never, never, never—in nothing great or small, large or petty—never give in except to convictions of honor and good sense.”

## BRUCE FOX

Convictions. Honor. Good sense. Old fashioned? Maybe. Naïve? Possibly. Stunningly simplistic? Perhaps. But the successful honors director has such traits in abundance. The successful honors director has honor, but honor tempered with good sense.

Be a successful honors director. Build your honors program. But keep the “honor” in your honors program. If not, why bother?

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