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Important Issues for Growing an Honors Program

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A common challenge in honors is gauging how much our respective programs should grow over a certain time period. Before that challenge can be fully addressed, however, several issues of a more rudimentary sort must be considered—issues concerning budget, scholarships, advising load, and development of community within the honors program. Essentially, directors must be able to financially support expansion (budget and scholarships) while not altering the environment of their programs (advising load and community development).

BUDGET

A program that outgrows appropriate funding levels for enrichment activities will quickly lose one of its most important and attractive characteristics. I will primarily focus on the programming budget, or "local" money, that is needed to support enrichment activities for honors students. As Spike Milligan once stated, "Money can't buy friends, but it can get you a better class of enemy." It is important to keep this adage in mind when making budget requests for programming. While a director should ensure that his or her honors program has all the monetary resources it needs for programming, any impression by other university entities that the program is receiving special treatment in regard to programming funds needs to be avoided.

One way to avoid the appearance of special treatment is to propose an expenditure per student that both you and your administration can agree on. This expenditure can thereafter be used as a metric when budgetary requests are made and will thus be less likely to cause resentment; the argument for increasing funds will not have to be revisited each time a request is made. In developing the metric, honors directors would do well to obtain information from honors programs at "sister" campuses in their systems and at comparable institutions. An NCHC- recommended site visitor may also provide a compelling argument to your administration for increased funding.

When making requests for university funding, honors program directors would be wise to first understand the fiscal culture of the university. Are

conservative budget requests typically made, or does everybody "shoot for the moon?" Some directors may get away with budget deficits and may, indeed, use those deficits to argue for more resources. Other directors, however, may lose their position as director if they exceed their budget allocation. A friendly dean or department head may be able to provide some very important insight into the nature of funding request practices at your college or university.

One final component of budgeting over which honors program directors may be able to exercise some direct control has to do with the employment of staff. Some administrations will not hesitate when it comes to supporting development of graduate student or student assistant positions since these positions help with student retention. If a budget request for a staff member is continually denied, you may want to consider asking for a graduate or student assistant during the next budget cycle.

If an honors program is unable to secure sufficient funding from his or her institution, fundraising from within the larger surrounding community may be another option although directors need to be wary here: a director who is spending too much time on fundraising is essentially robbing Peter to pay Paul since other aspects of the program such as organization, institutional reporting, or visibility will likely suffer. Most university administrations will offer some fundraising help to its honors programs, but an honors program director should not be expected to raise the majority of its needed funding.

SCHOLARSHIPS

Scholarships are, of course, an ideal way to support growth in an honors program since they help to attract and retain students. Prospective and current students as well as their families are very aware of the bottom line concerning college costs. An honors program director needs to be aware that the need for more scholarship money will grow as the program grows, particularly if scholarships are used heavily as recruiting tools. Directors should keep this awareness in mind especially when considering future growth of their programs. Annual funding requests to your university administration should include projected scholarship needs for future years so that the administration will not be surprised by large increases in scholarship budget requests when your program does grow.

Awareness of the relationship between growth of a program overall and growth of its scholarship needs will be important whether every student or a limited number receives a scholarship. Some programs may not have the financial support to provide scholarships to every student. If you cannot provide scholarships to each student, then consider developing a policy whereby

the top 10% of applicants receive a scholarship; this will make future budget requests easier. Also make sure that your application deadline coincides with the budget request deadlines at your institution.

ADVISING LOAD

Another issue that needs to be in the mind of any honors program director considering program growth concerns advising load. Honors programs often pride themselves on the quality of advising they are able to provide to their students. Advising, however, can quickly consume the staff of a program that has, for example, decided to expand by seventy students from one year to the next. As with programming money and scholarships, a maximum ratio of student to advisor should be developed and effectively communicated to the administration.

Several options are available to provide advising outside of your existing staff. An honors program that employs outside personnel for advising needs to implement a communications plan and a well-conceived training plan since, chances are, these advisors will not report directly to the honors program. Some universities have an academic advising center, and so some of the honors advising responsibility can be handled by this center. The best scenario in this case is to have the smallest acceptable number of advisors be responsible for honors advising. Another option is to ask your honors council members to help with advising or to ask departments with a large number of honors students to assign one faculty or professional advisor to honors students. A significant advantage to outsourcing your advising load is that it can allow your program to grow without the need for additional staff. One drawback to the above approaches, however, is that you are no longer in direct control of advising for students in your program. In such cases, honors program directors may want to implement advising evaluation forms, as our program and many others do, so that they can more accurately gauge the efficacy of the advice that is being provided to their students.

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT

Many competing interests on a campus challenge the development of community within an honors program, and growing a program too fast can damage community development. Furthermore, a program's entering students, who are not familiar with the program they have joined, may feel reluctant to adopt or follow an existing program's traditions or established norms. One mistake that newer programs sometimes make is allowing the entering student population to outnumber the returning student population. The larger of these two populations will likely dictate the culture within the program, leaving the director with the task of maintaining community—a task otherwise carried out by returning students.

Program growth may require directors to rethink events designed to develop community. Potluck dinners with an invited speaker are a convenient, often inexpensive way to feed and entertain a large number of students. Our program typically provides entrées and eating utensils/accoutrements (plates, cups, ice, etc.) but depends on guests for side dishes, beverages, and desserts. Where funding is a particularly difficult issue, a few large, well-organized events can be cheaper than many small events and just as effective at fostering community. Space issues also need to be considered since some events may need to be housed in areas of the campus that charge for their use or require advance reservations.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The wise director looks at least two or three years down the road when pondering the growth of his or her program. Growth can be an asset to a program, but it must be done at a pace that both the administration and the program are willing to support on a monetary, staffing, and organizational basis. The road of honors is strewn with former directors who grew their programs faster than support funding could keep up with—or at any rate faster than the resources needed to support growth were provided.

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