University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive | National Collegiate Honors Council

10-1-2007

Balancing Low Growth with High Success

Robert Hogner
Florida International University, rhogner@fiu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal

Part of the Higher Education Administration Commons

Hogner, Robert, "Balancing Low Growth with High Success" (2007). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive.* Paper 50.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nchcjournal/50

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the National Collegiate Honors Council at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Balancing Low Growth with High Success

ROBERT H. HOGNER
FLORIDA INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, following a growing recognition of the excellence of the Honors College at Florida International University (FIU), administrators within the university's College of Business Administration decided to initiate an honors program within the CBA. Now entering its fourth year, the small International Business Honors BBA Program is a centerpiece of the CBA's undergraduate international business program development efforts, having figured prominently in the CBA's achievement of national rankings for such programs.

This essay will trace the development of FIU's IBH program to its current state, emphasizing how a small program may achieve recognition and success without large student enrollment. It will describe how strategic partnerships and linkages, resource allocation, student leadership and achievement, and serendipity can successfully overcome a mentality that program growth is a dominant measure of program success. And it will describe how these dynamics present not only challenges but opportunities for success.

BACKGROUND

FIU first opened its doors in 1972. Reflecting the prevailing powers within Florida and by legislative mandate it was to be an upper-division university, i.e., limited to junior-senior undergraduate and graduate-level programs. With those limitations it offered no competitive challenge to the older Florida public universities, to the immense Florida community college system, or to local private universities. Indeed, rules that were then in place prohibited a football team and Ph.D. programs.

By 2003, FIU was a full-scale university, now known as South Florida's *public research university*. It had a wide range of traditional masters and doctoral programs and had recently opened a law school. Its 2003 enrollment was approximately 35,000; 38,000 by 2007. Central to the theme of this essay, in 2003 it was passing the twenty-year mark of its first freshman class and the ten-year mark of its small but thriving Honors College.

The Honors College at FIU fits the model of a well-crafted *independent* honors program or college. Students from various majors align themselves with the College, take multidisciplinary courses taught by College fellows individually or in teams, and then graduate with two degrees, one in their major and the other from the Honors College. Their honors courses substitute for a series of required or elective courses as part of their degree program. The Honors College has its own administrative staff and budget. Its faculty, some assigned full-time to the College but most on part-time loan, come mainly from the arts and sciences with a sprinkling from other colleges and schools.

The College of Business Administration, like other FIU schools and colleges, is an enterprise parallel to the Honors College. The CBA was a part of the original "1972 FIU"; by 2003 it had its own doctoral programs and internationally competitive masters programs. The CBA was and continues to be known for its international flavor and its focus on research and graduate-level studies. At the undergraduate level it has been a major FTE engine of the university. Its international BBA program has been nationally recognized as "better" by virtue of its large yearly production of international business BBA majors. The CBA also has had in place since 1992 a Civic Engagement Initiative to support its community and service-learning activities. Finally, on the 2003 horizon was the approval for Miami-Dade Community College to become Miami-Dade College with four-year programs that included a BBA program.

The year 2003 saw FIU's Honors College as a high-quality independent center of honors learning with accompanying "honors equals excellence" access to the central FIU budget. The CBA had a very large BBA program with a strategic focus in international business built upon its graduate programs' reputations and on the size of its undergraduate IB BBA program; like most such programs in Florida and across the country, it also had almost insurmountable budget problems.

THE INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS HONORS BBA PROGRAM

The IBH program as originally envisioned was to be a four-year BBA program with a full complement of CBA honors and elective courses, along with standard "breadth and background" courses in the arts and sciences. The model, reflective of a typical four-year experience, would have had students matriculating as freshmen and remaining in the business school for four years; this was to be the first departure from the "declaring a major as a sophomore" tradition held over at FIU from its 2+2 beginnings.

Reviewing a budget for this still to-be-proposed program led to vast rethinking of the model. As originally conceived, the IBH-BBA program would have required its own staff infrastructure: recruiting, admissions, advising, and so on. Further, it would have required a complete set of honors BBA courses, required and elective, for international business majors. In essence, the original model for the IBH-BBA program was as an independent and complete honors program *within* the CBA, mirroring the FIU Honors College structure within the larger university. Further, with the university one year out of a contentious period revising its undergraduate core curriculum, the chances were zero of the business school receiving university faculty approval for a stand-alone four-year program that crafted its own core curriculum.

Pragmatic thinking led to a call for revising the model. This task was given to an experienced CBA faculty member with ten years of experience as an Honors College Fellow. The rules were: *develop an IBH-BBA program, do it quickly (!), and do it more cheaply than was originally modeled*.

The new model was developed in consultation with the Honors College, faculty in the CBA, and faculty in the College of Arts and Sciences. IBH students would have to be admitted to and graduate from the Honors College. They also had to be admitted to the CBA in their junior year. CBA admission at the junior level is a rather routine matter, following the 2+2 tradition. For the Honors College, admission at the freshman or junior level requires a significantly higher standard for grade history, test scores, and writing ability. In essence, any student in the FIU Honors College who met prerequisites for BBA study would simply have to declare IBH their major. The result was the program no longer required new CBA admissions or advising staff, and the Honors College recruiting staff now had extra recruiting and retention features.

As redeveloped, the program required ratcheting up requirements for the BBA. The key elements of the program included:

- six to twelve credits of Honors College interdisciplinary honors courses, depending on how students structured their senior-year honors experience;
- six credits of new, CBA honors sections of international business and international management courses;
- six credits of ratcheted-up requirements for required BBA courses, e.g., an international law course rather than business law and a higher-level macro-economics course;
- a senior thesis requirement, a first for FIU and for the Honors College;
- a community-service requirement, a first for FIU; and
- restricted electives with an international focus.

The key elements of this program can be summarized as (1) introducing a limited number of honors classes *inside* the CBA; (2) partnering with the Honors College to offer a degree program; (3) stiffening learning objectives associated with required and elective courses, including selecting outside CBA courses that had significant writing requirements; and (4), establishing a senior thesis and a community service requirement.

The CBA funded two honors sections per year, a faculty director (paid with either a stipend or two course releases), faculty time associated with senior thesis supervision, and a small advertising and promotion budget.

IMPLEMENTING AND DEVELOPING THE IBH-BBA PROGRAM

The program was implemented in 2004 with an initial complement of eight students. These students were existing Honors College students who had planned to major in the CBA and therefore met program prerequisite requirements. Now in their junior year, they simply designated the new IBH degree program as their major. This initial group, along with other students interested in international business, quickly formed an informal program "advisory and development" group. Alongside and partly stimulated by this student group, an informal CBA undergraduate international business development faculty group was formed.

In November 2004, an IBH student service project—the Bangkok Global Leadership and Service Project (GLSP)—was planned for Spring Break 2005. Twenty-two undergraduate students participated in 2005, twenty-six in 2006, and twenty-seven in 2007. In partnership with programs and students from Thai universities, students spend their Spring Break in Thailand serving community and government sites that work with Thai children. They spend the months leading up to Spring Break in leadership training, team development work, and massive fund raising efforts. In addition to a student cost of $1000 and student-raised funds, the university supports the GLSP concept with funding from the Honors College, the College of Business Administration, the International Studies Center, the Center for Leadership and Service, and the Center for International Business Education and Research.

Intertwined with GLSP project development was the November, 2004 formation of the International Business Honor Society, chartered at FIU as a national honor society. IBHS is the first university **and** national-level international business honor society. IBHS developed quickly as an organization through which the GLSP's were organized. It also quickly developed a reputation as the CBA's and probably FIU's most active student organization.

Students during this period also developed an undergraduate journal focusing on business and social issues surrounding globalization: the *FIU Undergraduate Journal for Global Business and Community* (JGBC).

During the period 2004–2008, something unusual and exciting was obviously happening with undergraduate business education at FIU, and all the development experiences noted above were publicized within the national business school community. *The U. S. News & World Report*, now for four years in a row, has ranked FIU's undergraduate international business programs. While understanding that such rankings mean *nothing*, they also mean *everything*. The *USNWR* rankings became an IBH recruiting tool, a CBA faculty recruiting feature, and a part of the general public relations effort for the CBA and the university.

NON-GROWTH AS SUCCESS

The IBH-BBA Program presents its own set of development and growth "issues." Some of these issues relate to the incongruities of trying to start an honors program in a public urban university in a state historically low in per student spending in public higher education—currently the lowest in the country (*Miami Herald*, 27 August 2007, p. 1). Other issues relate to replacing institutional with entrepreneurial efforts. Still others relate to conceptual questions about such a program: for instance, is it simply another degree column in a distribution of students matrix, or must it be considered more broadly?

These growth and development issues exist within the context of IBH-related achievements: national rankings; an international journal; the Global Leadership and Service Projects; and the International Business Honor Society. In that context, growth and development issues persist.

First, the small size of the program presents a challenge to conventional thinking. It is the *smallest* BBA program with only sixteen students combined at the junior and senior level. Consequently, a series of business honors courses is being offered with eight students in each class. Recruiting efforts have resulted in a large increase in students who say as freshmen that they want to major in IBH, but when the junior-year threshold arrives, roughly ten percent (eight students including transfers) declare IBH as a major. These small class sizes have been redefined as a desirable program attribute that can serve as a reward for teaching assignments and that has helped win faculty support for the "small is successful" concept.

Ordinary thinking about the program leads CBA managers to want thirty to fifty students in each of the eight-student honors classes. They relent a bit, however, when faced with the challenge of finding faculty to supervise thirty to fifty senior theses. Sixteen students per year has become a "sufficient" level, with twenty-four seen as a "satisfying" level.

Program development and growth issues have also provided an opportunity for another CBA/Honors College joint venture. Shackled with FIU's two-plus-two history, the CBA continues to "have ownership" of undergraduate students only after they declare a major in their junior year. Reflecting a continuing vision to strengthen its relationship with the Honors College, the CBA initiated a joint effort with the Honors College to establish the Business Honors Community. With the motto "At FIU, Honors Means Business," the BHC will provide a place for freshmen through senior business students, CBA faculty, and South Florida business people to meet. Not incidentally, it will also provide freshman and sophomore students with the value-added intentional learning that the Honors College and CBA want to promote. In essence, the strategy of this program is to increase the size of the CBA-Honors pie by stemming the junior-year flow out of the Honors College of "intended" BBA majors. It is an intensive effort to provide, on the shoulders of the Honors College, a four-year CBA Honors experience without having a four-year CBA program. The BHC was initiated fall of of 2007.

SUMMARY

The International Business Honors BBA Program at Florida International University is a four-year experiment in a degree program that partners a traditional College of Business Administration and an independent Honors College. To date, despite low enrollment and accompanying pressures to increase it, the program continues to provide a unique, challenging, and beneficial student leaning experience of great value to the CBA, the Honors College, and the university.

A combination of student and faculty entrepreneurial spirit, a strategic vision supporting the concept, and trust across institutional boundaries provided the nurturing environment for this program's success. Where it has not succeeded, specifically in an acceptable level of enrollment, that same environment has provided for another innovate project, the Business Honors Community. That project, should it have its intended impact, will not only solve IBH enrollment challenges but also provide a greater degree of student retention and excitement.

****

The author may be contacted at

rhogner@fiu.edu.