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Growth = Bucks(?)

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GREGORY W. LANIER

Growth = Bucks(?)

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Many of us in honors education will readily agree that, if the equation above is ever true at all, it is a very sharp double-edged sword. I suspect that most of us who direct honors programs or colleges at public institutions have been sliced or diced more than once by an institution's growth imperatives. Although upper-level administrators often point to their honors programs with pride and tout the accomplishments of their honors students to alumni and benefactors, only a few honors programs and colleges actually report a funding baseline that adequately addresses all the needs of the program and its students; a consistent lament that has echoed for years throughout NCHC conferences is "if we only had enough funding, we'd do that too." To be fair to upper administrators, those of us in honors education need to admit that honors programs are the African violets of the academic floral landscape. In general, honors programs simply *require more*: they are more labor-, energy-, time-, and funding-intensive than programs for the bulk of the student population. In times of financial stress for higher education institutions (financial stress in higher education has become the status quo in Florida for at least a decade now), it can be difficult to shift funds to a high-cost program that sometimes serves less than 5% of the total student population when the institution as a whole is struggling to supply enough test tubes for the freshman chemistry labs or can't hire enough composition teachers to limit freshman composition classes to 22 to 25 students. Unfortunately, when viewed from the lens of a university president or chief accounting officer, the allocations that public institutions receive from their legislatures most often amount to flat budgets that barely cover increases in operational costs, particularly during times when a spike in energy prices can quickly consume whatever meager increase a rogue legislature might have deigned to grant during the last session.

Hence established programs at public institutions, be they honors or otherwise, find that increases in funding are often slow to come, and when they come, they are often tied to *enrollment growth*. In Florida, home of the Hanging Chad and Other Great Ideas That Have Not Been Imitated Elsewhere, we have a legislature that only, only, only provides new money for the state university system when new students appear, i.e., when we can demonstrate *enrollment growth*. If we can't, we should get ready for a cut; we are ecstatic if we received the same amount of funding we got last year—

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thank you very much, kind sirs—despite the steady increase in operational costs year after year. As Stanley Fish pointed out in a disdainful article titled “Access vs. Quality,” recently published in the *New York Times* (Aug. 1, 2007), this type of legislative thinking leads quickly to a culture of institutional mediocrity as all things gravitate toward an under-funded malaise:

The challenge is to combine first-class schooling with affordability and access. The temptation is to do things on the cheap.

Although much loved by legislative aides and the government bureaucracy, the practice whereby funding increases are directly and exclusively tied to enrollment growth is, almost by definition, doing it on the cheap since that approach allows no margin for enhancement or for advances in new directions. When additional funding is a direct function of rising numbers, it is not surprising that many honors programs, mine included, are under the imperative to grow, grow, grow. But enrollment growth by itself cannot fix the problem, as Fish also points out:

The conditions that leave a university system depressed have been a long time in the making and will take time to reverse. Five straight years of steadily increased funding, tuition raises and high-profile faculty hires would send a message that something really serious is happening. Ten more years of the same, and it might actually happen.

Moreover, there are at least two hidden and invidious threats within the “increased growth equals increased funding” formula. First, increased growth figures are rarely based on a single year’s numbers; the most common practice appears to be the vaunted “three-year rolling average,” in which enrollment figures are determined by calculating the average of “student credit hours” or “full-time equivalents” over the previous three years. In practice, that method basically holds institutions prisoner to whatever conditions existed two years ago. On the sound fiscal management side, this method avoids extreme changes—either up or down—caused by irregular spikes or dips in the overall numbers. But on the day-to-day management side, the method ensures that programs that are doing what is expected and growing will always be significantly under-funded since the newly generated funds will always lag at the very least by one or two years. Peter Sederberg’s title gets it right: “Nothing Fails Like Success.” The second and far darker danger is that, since the method is at best a gentleman’s handshake made by politicians, the promises for future rewards aren’t always kept.

This year in Florida, all of us in higher education—community colleges and universities alike—are facing overall budget cuts of 7–10%. At the University of West Florida, where we have been working hard to recover

from the overall dip in enrollment we suffered in the wake of Hurricane Ivan (which closed us for three weeks during the fall term of 2004), we are hopeful for an overall enrollment increase of 3–5% for the upcoming academic year. The situation is better/worse in Honors. Last year, the dean charged all the units with increasing enrollments (Honors was asked to grow by at least 5%), and so my Assistant Director and I instituted some of the recruiting strategies that we had long planned but never done. As a result, overall admissions to the UWF Honors Program are up 30%, and the incoming freshman class has increased from 109 in fall 2006 to 135 in Fall 2007—an increase of 24%. So I'm doing the math, and it looks really lousy; realistically, even if we tighten everywhere we can, we're probably faced with a 20–25% shortfall in meaningful funding given that we'll have fewer dollars to serve more students. In practice, that will mean that fewer honors theses will be financially supported, fewer honors students will present at the national, regional, and state conferences, fewer honors students will be able to have international experiences, and fewer honors courses will be offered. And there is no hope of a miraculous infusion of funding next year—remember the rolling average? We'll still be behind in funding next year even if the legislature flip-flops; it's only a question of whether we'll be way behind or as Sederberg aphoristically puts it, headed for life support.

Although Sederberg is right that “An Honors program/college should be no larger than what can be securely grounded in the university's resources and culture,” getting to that point of balance often requires the work ethic of a dray oxen, the balance of a high-wire dancer (not walker; dancer), the steely nerves of a high-stakes poker player, and sheer dumb luck, with sheer dumb luck often taking precedence. Although its defenders would have it otherwise, funding models based on enrollment growth don't supply a steady curve of increased funding that faithfully tracks a steady upward trend of growth, even if one factors in a two- to three-year lag time. Rather, I have long suspected that meaningful increases in honors funding come in a series of sporadic quantum jumps (henceforward known as QJs). At UWF, the first Honors Program QJ was modest but significant: in 1988 it was decided that the institution should have an honors program, and to that end a two-course-release position appeared for the first director and a half-time administrative support position materialized as well, along with the princely sum of \$5000 in expense funds to do all that honors is supposed to do. And that's how things stood for nearly a decade, save that the two-course-release position and the staff position disappeared, all the administrative functions having been absorbed into the portfolio of responsibilities handled by the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences.

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At the end of the millennium the UWF Honors Program received its most significant QJ when the institution, along with the rest of the state university system, was allocated the first of what was supposed to be a much ballyhooed three years of enhancement funding that would propel higher education in Florida into the twenty-first century. At UWF, some \$300,000 of that enhancement funding was earmarked for the Honors Program, and that largesse resulted in the appointment of a full-time Honors Director, a full-time Honors Coordinator, restoration of the half-time office support position, and a substantial increase in funding to support honors classes and activities (conference travel, leadership development, international experiences, etc.). The QJ in funding supported a QJ in the quality, reach, and culture of the program. The program expanded from a first-two-years paradigm into a 4-year academic experience more appropriate to an honors program at a regional comprehensive institution; special honors seminars were developed and an honors thesis became required, a summer international experience was added, support for student travel to the national, regional, and state honors conferences became possible, and development of a core community of honors students occurred. And, as one might expect, the program grew. Remarkably. From an active cohort of 250 with an incoming class of 60 in fall 2000, the program grew to an active cohort of nearly 500 with an incoming class of over 130. Thus we can easily demonstrate *enrollment growth* since the program expanded surely and steadily until it doubled in size.

So, since funding is tied directly to enrollment growth, the funding for the program has doubled as well, right? If you answered yes, you didn't pay attention to Hidden Danger #2. The much ballyhooed three-year enhancement plan for higher education in Florida, which was to have netted the Honors Program an overall total of \$600,000 in operating funds (\$300,000 in year 1; \$150,000 in both years 2 and 3), was scuttled by the Florida legislature the very next year. And the UWF Honors Program has basically been stuck at the funding level established by the last QJ ever since.

When just waiting around for the next QJ proved tiresome, I sought the opportunity to have the Honors Program included on the regular program review cycle in the hope that an external voice would be more successful in articulating the plight of Honors than I had been. In January of this year, Bob Spurrier of Oklahoma State and Kate Bruce of UNC-Wilmington were kind enough to evaluate my program, and they concluded:

While the strengths of the [UWF] Honors Program are compelling, there are insufficient resources to support the program. These concerns are in several areas: budget to support program needs and staff development, OPS or permanent funds to compensate faculty teaching in honors, and space to create a true

living-learning community and to administer an effective program. While we will detail these concerns below and suggest possible solutions, we want to underscore the concern that budget resources have failed to keep up with honors program growth, even though “expand honors recruitment” is noted as a strategic goal in CAS.

As is too often the case in higher education, when an outside consultant says the exact same thing that has been internally ignored for years, for some reason the administration finally listens, as the dean’s response to the report indicates:

6. Substantially increase budget resources.

We are very sympathetic to this central criticism of the report. Despite the dramatic growth in the program, the funding levels have not only not kept pace, but in some ways Honors is substantially less well funded than we used to be. Given the challenging economic environment in which we find ourselves, it is unlikely that we will be successful in a campaign for new money. However, we have targeted some potential resources that might be reallocated for Honors support as a start.

Hence I am hopeful that the next significant QJ will eventually appear, just not this year. And maybe not the next. But at the least, the issue is finally part of the official discussion that extends beyond the campus (all results from Program Reviews in Florida have to be reported to the Florida Board of Governors), and this usually means that problems do get redressed—maybe not immediately, but at some point the resources do flow.

But lest this seem like excessive whining, I would like to point out that the QJ effect is by no means limited to honors. During my strange career, I have been a department chair (for a total of thirteen years, spanning two departments in different disciplines) as well as Director of the School of Fine and Performing Arts in addition to directing an honors program for nearly a decade. In terms of day-to-day management, it didn’t really matter whether the financial crunch was in the Honors Program or the Department of English, Foreign Languages, Art, Music, or Theatre. In each case funding did not smoothly appear (or disappear) as the number of students waxed (or waned) but rather appeared in significant QJs related to specific circumstances. In Theatre, for example, after years of lobbying we broke the equipment-funding barrier (previously, allocations for equipment funding at UWF were reserved exclusively for the hard sciences) and received a significant funding QJ that allowed us to replace ancient sound and light boards as well as some lighting instruments and many of the shop tools. In Art, a QJ allowed

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us to renovate the graphic design lab; in Music, a QJ funded by an external donor allowed UWF to become an All-Steinway school. Years ago, a QJ resulted in both scholarships and graduate assistant funding for the masters program in English. In every one of those cases, funding had been basically flat regardless of the specific enrollment pattern, and realistically, even if there had been steady incremental increases in funding that matched enrollment growth, the total increases would not have resulted in the amount of funding needed to accomplish any of those projects. That's the downside of Hidden Danger #1: funding based on enrollment growth simply decays to the steady state in the long run and never permits innovation or enhancement.

Although I have never done a systematic investigation (one probably needs to be done), I would suspect that nearly all honors programs depend on QJs to support both growth and program enhancement. The sheer number of anecdotal stories of how this or that new president or provost stepped in and doubled or tripled the honors funding at this or that institution suggests that QJs are a common practice in honors (I myself know of at least six such true cases of significant honors QJs). My conversations with deans and associate deans at other institutions, some similar in size and focus to UWF, some not, confirm my suspicion that QJ funding is fairly widespread throughout higher education. If that is so, then it would seem logical to me that those of us in honors should work collectively to devise methods to improve the chances that the resources for honors programs and funding flow appropriately.

I've articulated the downsides of QJ funding above; on the upside, when it happens, QJ funding does infuse substantial resources into an honors program. There seem to be roughly three moments when honors programs can reasonably expect QJs in their funding. First, and most obvious, is the QJ at program startup. Despite the temptation is to do it on the cheap as much as possible, almost every Honors program receives start-up funding. The variable here is the size of the quantum—too often the QJ is simply a one- or two-course-release model along with token operational funding rather than an allocation sufficient to begin establishing a program “grounded in its core mission to provide an enriched learning environment for high-achieving students” (Sederberg). The second and often most lucrative QJ is what I would call, for lack of a better term, the Administrative Imperative QJ. Sederberg describes the conditions that enhanced the funding for the Honors College at the University of South Carolina:

Overall, the budget for the Honors College more than doubled between 1993 and 1999.

These happy consequences, then, arose from two factors:

- A university leadership committed to the goal of an enhanced Honors College in terms of both size *and* quality.

- Relatively prosperous times in the state that contributed to modestly increasing appropriations for higher education.
However, two further background factors were also important:
- A relatively steady state in terms of overall undergraduate enrollment.
- A president committed not simply to the Honors College as an island of excellence but to enhanced overall undergraduate opportunities.

As most of us in honors openly or covertly acknowledge, the best friend an honors program can find is the president who embraces advancing the program as a central piece of her/his personal agenda to advance the entire institution. When those stars align, the funding flows. A sub-species of the Administrative Imperative QJ occurs when the decision is made on a campus to elevate honors from program to college status—that metamorphosis by necessity needs the backing of the upper administration and normally entails a noteworthy infusion of dollars. The third type of QJ increase is triggered by an external review. In a very sad way, nearly every department chair or program director on a public campus is expected to whine and whine loudly about being under-resourced. And we do. We do it often and well. And we are ignored. But when someone from the outside shows up and whispers the very same thing, the administration suddenly sits up and takes notice; often funding for the department or program is increased as a consequence. That's just one reason why a review by the NCHC-Recommended Site Visitors is extremely important, and it was a major factor in my decision to bring two consultants to my campus. I knew that Bob Spurrier and Kate Bruce's words would have more weight than my own.

When their collective impact is summed, the three types of QJ funding could probably serve the needs of most honors programs or colleges well, even those that are growing rapidly, *if*, and this is a huge if, both the frequency and the size of the QJs are adequate. If the frequency of QJs can be measured in terms of decades, as they can be at UWF, then funding will be a huge problem. Likewise, if the increases are token or minimal, even if frequent, then there will be no way to use them to enhance or expand the program since such funding essentially amounts to steady-state funding. What is needed, in my opinion, is the creation of an environment in which QJ funding for honors occurs at reasonable intervals—probably at least once every four to seven years, and in which the quanta are sufficient not only to manage the enrollment growth that probably occurred during that interval but also to enable meaningful enhancement of the program in at least one area (i.e. service learning or international experiences added or enhanced, a first-year

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experience or other curricular changes instituted, community or cultural opportunities added or heightened).

Since in truth there probably is nothing that the honors education community can do to eliminate QJ funding or institute a different model—we just don't have the clout or leverage necessary—I suggest that we look soberly at what we can do to enhance our position within the present system. The challenge, as I see it, is to do our best to manage QJ funding so that it has an optimal impact on our programs. To that end, we should probably recognize that those of us in the NCHC can do very little to manage QJs of the first or second types. Decisions about the parameters of a new honors program are made beyond our collective purview and often without our knowledge; nor would it be possible or desirable to insert honors education into the process of hiring a provost or president. But there is something that we might be able to do about the third type.

As I look over the status of departments and programs across my campus, I am struck by the fact that some programs are infrequently stressed by resource shortfalls regardless of whatever whining or yelping the program director or chair happens to be doing (admittedly, my current status as Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences lets me poke my nose into enrollment figures, budget spreadsheets, and operational costs others my not be able to see). At UWF, those areas include Education, Engineering, Business, Music, Chemistry, Nursing, Clinical Lab Sciences, and Social Work. Areas where the shortfalls look to my eye to be far more persistent and pervasive and the stress far more acute include English, Communication Arts, Criminal Justice, Government, Philosophy, History, Foreign Languages, Theatre, and, of course, Honors, just to name a few. I am not suggesting that there is a group of haves and a group of have-nots at UWF since most of those areas have been enhanced in recent years. But it seems to me that the funding QJs for the first group have, over the last two decades, been both more frequent and more substantial than the QJs received by the other group. A major reason for the disparity, I suspect, can be found on page 10 of the current *2007–2008 UWF Catalog*. All the programs in the first group are accredited by outside agencies: Education by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Business by The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), Electrical and Computer Engineering by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET), etc. As an anecdotal confirmation of that phenomenon, I can with certainty report that during the 2006–2007 academic year, when the College of Arts and Sciences was allocated one and only one new faculty line, that line went to the Department of Music. Why? Because the National Association of Schools of Music (NASM), which paid an accreditation visit

to the UWF campus in 2005–2006, stated in their program review report that the UWF Music accreditation would be in jeopardy unless someone with expertise in music theory was added immediately to the Music faculty. In the resource allocations for that year, the substantial need in areas that had experienced sizeable if not explosive enrollment growth for years—History, Philosophy, and Honors, to name just three—were pushed aside so that the concerns of the accreditation agency could be met swiftly.

The moral of the story? Accreditation matters. And accreditation matters especially in terms of making certain that the accredited program has the resources needed to deliver a high-quality program. As Sederberg so nicely puts it, all of us managing honors programs have to make certain that our resources can support the quality of the experience for our students. Underfunding more or less guarantees that

Every aspect of the program/college will be stressed. Honors residential opportunities will be woefully inadequate to handle the demand; the freshman advising system will be overwhelmed; honors course availability will not accommodate the demand; operating budgets will run deficits; faculty will complain as their sections increase in size (if that's even possible); students will feel cheated; and parents will be angered.

As I said above, we all know that the external voice of a consultant trumps the internal voice of a director or chair every time. I would like to suggest, however, that when that external voice comes from an accrediting agency, it comes as close to being as irresistible as it can within an academic environment.

Perhaps it is time, and I think it is, for NCHC to give serious thought to becoming an accrediting body. No other single action would, I submit, do as much to ensure that honors programs everywhere receive both the respect and the resources that they deserve. On the resource management side, an accreditation review every five to seven years would most likely ensure that the scrutinized honors program would receive a substantial funding QJ every five to seven years as well. If I had been able to argue that the NCHC-accreditation status of the UWF Honors program hinged on UWF's immediate investment of funds in Honors, as stated in the official program review report, I would be far more confident those resources would appear. Meanwhile, wish me luck as we struggle through what is very likely to be an extremely difficult year.

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