

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council -
-Online Archive

National Collegiate Honors Council

Fall 2007

Nothing Fails Like Success: Managing Growth in a Highly Developed Honors Program

Peter Sederberg

South Carolina Honor College, psederb@emory.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal>



Part of the [Higher Education Administration Commons](#)

Sederberg, Peter, "Nothing Fails Like Success: Managing Growth in a Highly Developed Honors Program" (2007). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council --Online Archive*. 43.

<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/nhcjournal/43>

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.

PETER C. SEDERBERG

Nothing Fails Like Success: Managing Growth in a Highly Developed Honors Program

PETER C. SEDERBERG

SOUTH CAROLINA HONORS COLLEGE

INTRODUCTION

“Nothing fails like success,” economist Kenneth Boulding observed decades ago. He went on to explain that we only learn from failure; if a particular pattern of behavior or policy seems to be working we continue it until, of course, it fails. Then we might learn something. The law of diminishing marginal utility echoes Boulding’s aphorism. What starts out as a source of pleasure yields diminishing utility until it reaches zero or even sinks to a negative return. I recall that my introductory economics instructor used the example of how the pleasure yielded by the first in a series of cold beers on a hot day ultimately becomes a nausea-inducing, coma-provoking calamity. I expect the beer example is still widely used in introductory economics classes.

This line of somewhat counter-intuitive thinking corrects the conventional wisdom that you cannot have too much of a good thing (or you can’t be too rich or too thin). Unfortunately, for successful honors programs and colleges, the conventional wisdom often seems to guide the policy making of university leadership when it comes to determining the appropriate size of a college or program. After all, administrators seem to think, if a program is perking along with 500 students, it will be twice as good with a 1000.

Seldom will mandated growth be that starkly justified, though as the decision moves up the institutional hierarchy from dean to provost to president to trustees, it often seems to approach such simple idiocy. Honors directors and deans, laboring closer to the front lines, better recognize the complexity and challenges of managing enrollment growth. Indeed, each added student increases marginal costs in both quantitative and qualitative senses. Anticipating the full costs of growth is difficult; persuading the central administration to address them often approaches impossibility. Moreover, my personal experience leading the South Carolina Honors College for eleven years and overseeing an increase in size from fewer than 800 to 1200 students

NOTHING FAILS LIKE SUCCESS: MANAGING GROWTH

taught me that, no matter how carefully the growth process is managed and supported, honors remains more vulnerable to events beyond its control than most of the major colleges in a university. To paraphrase another aphorism from economics, when a college of arts and sciences catches a cold, honors goes on life support.

Managing growth also presumes university leaders possess some notion of an appropriate size and are not simply “biggering” for the sake of “biggering.” Determining appropriate size, though, reminds me of the small boy who asked his father why he was so tall. His father replied, “So my feet can reach the ground.” An honors program/college should be no larger than what can be securely grounded in the university’s resources and culture.

THE PRESSURES TO GROW

The pressure to increase the size of a successful program or college comes from a number of often reinforcing directions, and we cannot dismiss any of these motives as frivolous. All deserve careful consideration, not peremptory dismissal. The interrelated growth imperatives include:

1. *Increasing demand.* Those of us in honors leadership have a dirty little secret—we like to turn away qualified students. Having more, even many more, qualified applicants than we can accommodate validates the prestige and visibility of our program. High-achieving honors programs and colleges, like the wider institutions of which they are a part, report with pride indexes of selectivity and yield. After all, we commonly compare ourselves to fine liberal arts colleges, and they accept only a portion of their qualified applicants. Moreover, once we reach the point where we turn down applicants with credentials that were competitive in the recent past, we benefit from what I term “the reverse Groucho Marx effect:” People *want* to be in a club that won’t have them. When the South Carolina Honors College started declining applicants who had been admitted to Furman, Emory, or Davidson, we moved from being a “fall-back” school to being among the top choices of our applicants. However, the folks in enrollment management and in the upper levels of the administration are not as easily convinced of the beneficial effects of increased selectivity for honors admission even though they may pursue it for the wider institution. In my experience, they are not persuaded by the observation that Harvard could double the size of its enrolling class with no diminishment in overall quality but chooses not to do so. The leaders of public institutions, however, cannot afford the luxury of labels like Harvard and Ferrari that deliberately limit supply to maintain brand mystique.

Even if the wider institution is increasing its overall selectivity, the applicants who do not pass muster in the honors admissions process are likely to be in the upper quartile of the institution's admitted class. University leadership may fear, with some reason, that honors rejects will be less likely to matriculate in the regular university. Public universities are not immune from the desire for institutional label enhancement, and this desire contributes to the pressure on honors not to become increasingly selective even as the overall admissions process grows more selective.¹

2. *The desire for enhanced institutional transformation.* Wider institutional interests in expanding the size of a successful honors program or college do not simply reflect crude numerical calculations but also include important qualitative dimensions. Highly developed honors programs and colleges often garner increased institutional support by arguing that successful honors recruitment not only leads to a better statistical profile in *US News and World Report* but also qualitatively transforms the undergraduate educational environment. In promoting our programs, we tout the benefits of salting the undergraduate population with increased numbers of highly motivated, talented students who will enrich the classroom environment across the university, contribute their talents to the larger community, and increase the probability of national awards and recognition, thereby adding further luster to the university's reputation. Our initial success in promoting this justification and demonstrating its validity rebounds back against us as an argument for expanding the program continuously in the hopes of further institutional enhancement.
3. *Overall institutional growth.* The undergraduate population at many state universities is expanding. As the size of the overall entering class rises, university administrators can make the apparently straight-forward argument that the incoming honors class should expand simply to maintain the same approximate percentage of the overall freshman class. During the middle years of my tenure as dean (1997 through 2001), the entering class of the honors college stabilized at about 9% of the overall freshman class (approximately 250 out of 2800 incoming freshmen). This period of stability ended, though, in 2002. Since then, the overall incoming class grew, first in an unplanned spurt and

¹ If the South Carolina Honors College kept the admissions criteria used in 1994, we probably would admit over 1000 students and enroll an incoming class approaching 500 rather than 300.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE SUCCESS: MANAGING GROWTH

then as a result of deliberate policy, until in 2006 it reached nearly 3700 students.² Maintaining the same ratio implied an entering honors class of approximately 330 students. Consequently, we faced pressure to increase the absolute size of our entering class simply to maintain this ratio. As a result, the freshman honors class grew over the next four years to approximately 300 students. This growth, while significant, still resulted in an entering honors class that comprised a smaller percentage of the overall freshman class than in 2001.

4. *Anti-elitism and the pressure to expand opportunity.* Those of us who have participated in the debates surrounding either the founding of an honors college or the significant enhancement of an existing program undoubtedly recall the opposition arising from those who believe that honors education smacks of an illegitimate elitism inappropriate for a state-supported university. I am not about to rehash this debate; however, even at schools where honors is a deeply established and widely supported component of the institution, a strong residual sentiment often supports making these enriched opportunities available to more students. Most, if not all, of the members of NCHC respond to this credible concern in various ways: for example, creating a path through which students can transfer into honors after their first semester or year; opening honors courses to non-honors students on a space available basis; or creating programs that are designed from conception to include both honors and non-honors students. At South Carolina, the university even created a second-tier program that currently enrolls a considerably larger number of incoming students than the Honors College. The desire to open honors opportunities to more students, though, can also be indirectly reflected in a resistance to enhancing existing admission standards even in the context of a rapidly expanding applicant pool. Particularly at the point where a new college is launched out of a pre-existing honors program, an expanded publicity campaign, unaccompanied by new admissions standards, has often led to massive increases in the freshman class. The resulting enrollment overload usually leads to an immediate deterioration in quality due to overcrowding.

² The surge in 2002 was unplanned, but it brought a windfall in tuition revenue at a time when the state appropriation was falling. Subsequent increases were deliberately pursued to maintain and enhance this windfall into a sustained zephyr of revenue. Formal university policy aims to increase the size of the incoming class to over 4100 students in the next five years and the honors class to 350, but it remains to be seen if the university is able or even willing to achieve these goals.

MANAGING GROWTH: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

The negative consequences of poorly managed growth can be easily predicted and are, unfortunately, more widely distributed among our larger programs than we may care to admit.³ Obviously, the size and pace of enrollment growth affects the intensity of the management challenge; a jump of 100 students in an incoming class that previously averaged 150 takes on an entirely different character if it occurs in one year rather than over five. Even a well run, strongly supported program can be overwhelmed by a sudden surge in numbers. A rapid and unanticipated increase leads to a classic “overshoot and collapse” outcome. 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.

And this is just in the first semester. A sustained increase will compound the problems over the years. Even with the support of a sympathetic central administration flush with resources (what a fantasy!), years of sustained investment will be required to address the curricular, organizational, and residential deficits.

At the most basic level of quantifiable and easily anticipated consequences of growth, the response is simple to define, though perhaps less easy to implement: plan for the increase. The first step in the plan must be to control the admissions process. When John Palms became President of the University of South Carolina in 1992, he immediately identified the Honors College as a focus for investment. First on his agenda, though, was to increase the size of the incoming class from about 160 to 200 students, a rather modest growth goal on its face. Unfortunately, this target was implemented immediately, before initiating enhanced recruitment to expand the size and quality of the applicant pool, with predictable results. The Admissions Office, responding to the central mandate, admitted students that were less qualified than those who had enrolled over the previous decade. In fact, even with the relaxed standards, in the absence of a sustained effort to increase the number of applications to the College, enrollment numbers rose only a modest 20 students for the fall of 1993. These last 20, though, significantly lowered the overall class profile. On the bright side, they were easily

³ I am not going to name names. Insofar as I provide any concrete illustrations, I will draw upon my own experience with the South Carolina Honors College. Overall, we have done a reasonably good job in managing the growth of the College from approximately 750 students in 1993-1994 to 1250 students in 2006-2007.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE SUCCESS: MANAGING GROWTH

absorbed within the existing Honors College structure. My predecessor, William Mould, immediately tightened control over the admissions process, recruitment was enhanced, and the decline in quality was quickly reversed. The target class of 200 was met for the fall of 1995, and their statistical profile returned to the previous norm.

The second component of managing growth is equally obvious: leverage more resources. The obvious, of course, easily eludes us. Bill Mould, however, succeeded. Building on the president's high profile aim to bring in an honors class of 200, he was able to garner a three-year boost in the College's base budget amounting to a 50% increase overall. The first year of this increase was slated for 1994–95, the year I began serving as dean.⁴ Consequently, over this period, I was able to hire an additional advisor and an associate dean, enhance honors course subsidies to departments, and thereby increase the number of honors courses to accommodate the growing numbers of students.

The president's ultimate goal, though, was to increase the incoming class to 250 students. By the fall of 1996, I was convinced we could fulfill his aspiration and maintain, even improve, their quality, *if* we received an increase in our budget comparable to the one I inherited from Bill.⁵ Again, the president was supportive, and the additional budget allocation allowed us to add another advisor and increase our course offerings over a three-year period. 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.⁶

⁴ Thanks, Bill.

⁵ I titled my proposal "1000 x 2000," in that four entering classes of 250 students starting with that entering in fall 1997 would result in a college of over 1000 students by the year 2000.

⁶ President Palms did much more than significantly increase the direct support of the Honors College. He also secured a \$20 million dollar gift to fund a full scholarship for out-of-state students to complement the existing one for South Carolina residents; he increased the number and value of other scholarship programs; he greatly improved the resources of the Office of Admissions; he raised general admissions standards; he built new high-end residence halls; and he improved support services for the general undergraduate student population.

The last two points suggest more qualitative dimensions of successful growth management that go beyond the obvious need to control the rate of growth and increase honors budgets.

In a “steady state” university—one where both the undergraduate student population and the faculty numbers remain constant—increasing the size of the honors college while maintaining program quality increases marginal costs, both in ways easily measurable and in more qualitative terms. Note that between 1993 and 2000 our enrollment increased about 50% while budgets doubled. Not only did we add advisors and an additional associate dean, but the increasing complexity of college operations required our own IT administrator. Moreover, the marginal cost of extracting additional honors courses from departments increased. This marginal cost involves both the direct cost of an additional course and the indirect cost of the impact on general undergraduate educational opportunities.

South Carolina Honors College provides a curriculum-rich environment. We roughly calculate that we must add an honors class to each semester’s offerings for every 8 to 10 additional students enrolled in the College. An additional 350 students require at least 35 more classes each semester. Ultimately, a 50% increase in the honors student body was matched by an approximately equal increase in the number of honors courses. Per course compensation paid to the departments for these additional courses necessarily rose to enable them to cover their normal instructional obligations.⁷

This leads to a more qualitative dilemma: at what point does the “burden” of honors instruction begin to significantly impair the quality of the overall undergraduate experience? One pragmatic justification offered for an institutional investment in honors is that it is skimmed lightly from across the top of the university’s instructional resources so that the impact on regular students is small. Though no literal “tipping point” exists, as the college curriculum expands in a steady-state university, the negative impact on overall undergraduate instruction inevitably rises beyond “negligible.” As this negative impact intensifies, adding additional courses to match growing student demand becomes increasingly difficult and expensive, and the required budgetary increases needed to maintain the honors curriculum approaches improbable, if not impossible, levels. The resulting inability to offer additional honors courses leads to a decline in the quality of the honors experience. Pressure to maintain enrollment will inevitably contribute to a degradation of the honors curricular offerings. The general arc of decline is clear:

⁷ I will not belabor the details of this process except to point out that these marginal costs varied with the discipline. Honors foreign language sections, for example, were commonly capped at 16 students as opposed to 18 to 22 in the regular sections; honors introductory biology, in contrast, was capped at 50 versus 300 in the regular sections.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE SUCCESS: MANAGING GROWTH

“honors only” courses close earlier or grow in size; honors sections “embedded” in larger regular sections increase as a proportion of total offerings; and the use of the so-called “h-option,” where students contract with their professors in regular courses to do some extra enriching exercise for honors credit, grows more common.

This degenerative pressure extends beyond the core mission of honors instruction to every other operational aspect of the college. Increasing the incoming class by 50% places stress on everything else related to honors operations as these students make their way through the pipeline: educational support and academic advising; mentors for research assistantships and senior theses; existing honors facilities; and honors residential opportunities.⁸

These problems arise in a steady-state university. The situation grows much worse much more rapidly in a university where relative resources are contracting. After 2001, the University of South Carolina, like most other public institutions, experienced an extended period of declining budgetary support from the state. Consequently, a hiring freeze was imposed, and the number of tenure-track faculty declined. However, in large part to replace the loss of state support, the undergraduate population increased by 20% between 2001 and 2005. In this unpromising environment, the Honors College incoming class grew from the 250s to slightly over 300 students.

In recognition of the looming challenge and in the absence of any hope for additional university support, we initiated a “participation fee” for honors students that currently amounts to \$200 per semester. This fee generates nearly \$500,000 a year. In addition, my successor negotiated an increase in the base budget when he began his tenure in 2005. This resource infusion, however, may not be sufficient even though it greatly exceeds the resource increases that successfully supported the significantly larger enrollment expansion of 1994 to 2000. The reason is simple: managing growth in honors enrollment beyond some point requires broad institutional investment in undergraduate education, not simply increased resources for honors. In the absence of such an institutional commitment, one or more of three results will ensue: the quality of honors education will decline; the quality of the general undergraduate educational experience will decline; and/or honors enrollment will fall in either an unplanned or deliberate fashion.

⁸ These problems emerge even in a strongly supportive environment. The small administration building of the South Carolina Honors College is inadequate for a College that is coming close to doubling its size between 1993 and 2007. The honors freshmen residence that opened in 1997 could not even accommodate the demand that year when 253 students entered. Help, is on the way in the shape of a massive new two-year honors residence hall that will also include office space for advisors. Unfortunately, its availability has been delayed until 2009.

The South Carolina Honors College currently faces such a triple threat. Between 2001 and 2006 the incoming class rose from 258 to 312 students. If this current increase of approximately 50 students is sustained, it will ultimately produce a college approaching 1300 students.⁹ Concurrently, the overall undergraduate population increased by 3100 students. Unfortunately, tenure-track faculty barely increased. As a consequence, many key departments must meet increased instructional demands with the same or slightly more faculty. Based on our past experience, 200 to 250 more students would require offering an additional 25 honors classes each semester. Academic departments, however, are groaning under the instructional load created by the overall undergraduate population and resist offering more honors classes.

The university, to its credit, is pursuing a multiyear hiring initiative, but faced with a bulge of replacement hiring due to retirements combined with the overall enrollment surge, student/faculty ratios stay at levels significantly higher than in 2001.¹⁰ Consequently, the overall fabric of undergraduate education is fraying, and the Honors College cannot insulate itself from the ragged consequences. To make matters worse, the university still operates under a modified version of a “Value-Centered-Management” budget system, inaugurated concurrently with the enrollment surge, where colleges keep a major portion of the tuition they generate. Under this system, the “value” driving undergraduate instructional decisions is to deliver instruction in the cheapest way possible. If a class must use a tenure-track faculty member, make the enrollment as large as possible. If a course must have a low enrollment (for example, foreign language), use adjuncts and graduate students as much as possible. This value directly counters the honors goal of placing the best professors in small-enrollment honors classes and minimizing the use of adjuncts and graduate students. In this context, the Dean of Arts and Sciences avows she does not want any of her “planes” to fly half-filled, signaling her preference for wide-bodied jets, not 15-passenger honors seminars.

The convergence of all these factors—a growing honors population, increasing overall undergraduate enrollment, an undergraduate instructional faculty that lags significantly behind the enrollment growth, and a budget system that encourages delivering instruction at the lowest possible cost—creates an environment that threatens the quality of both the Honor College and

⁹ Not all students graduate in four years.

¹⁰ Replacement hires often go to fill general instructional needs; however, the new faculty hiring initiative tends to support creative, multi-disciplinary hiring plans that strengthen the university in rising areas of academic teaching and research interest. For example, a Middle East hiring initiative might combine hires in history, geography, religion, and Middle-Eastern languages. In a purely academic sense, such an initiative enriches the university; from the perspective of general education courses to meet the burgeoning student demand, the new hires may fall short in alleviating the pressure.

NOTHING FAILS LIKE SUCCESS: MANAGING GROWTH

the overall undergraduate educational experience. What's more, these trends possess high inertia. They cannot be easily or rapidly reversed.

In these circumstances, the appropriate growth strategy may, paradoxically, require contraction. The most important imperative of a high-profile honors college or program is to sustain its reputation for excellence. Glossy brochures and a flashy web presence cannot achieve this imperative; ultimately, it must be embodied in the lived experience of its students. If they matriculate to swelling or closed classes, overloaded advisors, declining enrichment opportunities, all occurring within a university-wide instructional environment under even greater stress from overcrowding, then their degraded experience will rapidly translate into a depreciation of the college's reputation. A premium-quality honors college can easily ramp up its enrollment once the overall institutional context justifies it. A sullied reputation might never be repaired.

At the last, growth management must be guided not by artificial ratios but by the resource requirements for sustaining excellence. Just as we must be tall enough to reach the ground, for if we do not reach it we will fall, a highly developed honors program/college must also stay grounded in its core mission to provide an enriched learning environment for high-achieving students. If it grows beyond its capacity to provide for this core mission, then it, too, will fall.

The author may be contacted at

psederb@emory.edu