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When It Comes Time Not to “Jump the Shark”: Stepping Down as Director

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BACKGROUND

I was the founding director of the honors program at Angelo State University. Our program started off in a small room in our library back in 2001 with seventeen students. Since then, the program has grown to approximately 150 students with a 2,000-square-foot lounge. Additionally, we received a \$250,000 donation for programming and scholarships. After seven years as Director, in 2007 I began to contemplate the possibility of stepping down, and at the start of the fall 2008 semester I made the difficult decision so that I could devote more time to my scholarly endeavors. In retrospect, I wish that I had had some of the insight I am providing in this essay, and I hope that I can help others who are contemplating a move, permanent or temporary, out of honors.

INTRODUCTION

I recently heard the term “jumping the shark” and decided to look into this colloquialism. The original reference for “jumping the shark” is an episode in “Happy Days” when Fonzie jumps over a shark tank in order to maintain his coolness in front of his friends. Since that time, the term has come to refer to television shows that have passed their peak and, in turn, do odd things with plot lines in order to regain viewership or reinvent the show. In many ways, this term could be extended to the issue of when, why, and how somebody should step down as director of an honors program. Using the metaphor of “jumping the shark,” this essay will discuss the timing and reasons driving a director’s decision to leave an honors program, focusing on some reasons why somebody should not step down, some reasons why they should, and some matters to consider during and after stepping down. Finally, I will discuss what a former director might want to do in order to assure a successful return to honors.

REASONS FOR NOT STEPPING DOWN

It may seem a little odd to discuss reasons for not stepping down first, but this issue is important since some directors do step down prematurely. A

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common mistake that directors make in stepping down is feeling that their program lacks adequate resources to do everything they want to do, and so they become frustrated with their progress. But if you are honest with yourself, you usually realize that other programs and academic departments on campus also lack the funding necessary to do what they could be doing, and, in some cases, your vision for the program and for the resources associated with it might not be in line with the university's priorities. In these tight budgetary times, most programs lack sufficient resources and must live with less than the ideal.

Other directors may step down because they feel that their honors supervisor is not paying enough attention to the program. However, if you follow NCHC guidelines, then your supervisor should be your chief academic officer, so you are dealing with a person who is extremely busy. While your supervisor should demonstrate an interest in the program when you hold your periodic meetings or when you informally discuss the program with him or her, this person probably does not have the time to pat you on the back every time you do something well.

Other directors become disillusioned when they find that people on campus just do not understand the honors program. Physicists aside, do you understand string theory or, for that matter, Heisenberg's uncertainty principle? The point here is that none of us can be expected to know something about every initiative or program on campus. If people do lack an understanding of your program, then you can enhance its visibility, perhaps by sending out emails, sponsoring campus events, and writing newsletters to promote your program.

On another note, some directors might get frustrated with their situation and threaten to resign in order to get the attention of their supervisor, which is probably the worst reason for stepping down. If your supervisor thinks you are threatening to step down in order to manipulate him or her, you may find yourself being removed from honors before you are actually ready to leave.

The last two reasons for not stepping down primarily have to do with perceived productivity. You may feel you are doing all you can in honors and elsewhere but not getting enough done. I will discuss resource issues associated with stepping down later, but some of us just need to learn how to delegate. Newsletters, for example, can be written by a journalism or English major in the program, with you just providing the initial topics and editing. Consider generating subcommittees within your honors advisory council that can handle some parts of your job (e.g., admissions, student events, or external relations). Most honors directors understood when they took the job that they would have a harder time performing consistently well in teaching or research. To overcome this difficulty, you might find ways to incorporate your honors work into your professional advancement by, for instance, doing research with an honors student in your own academic department or writing articles and doing presentations on honors topics or on honors education in your field. You would be wise to first have discussions with your honors supervisor and department head about where you can place your honors work among your promotion materials.

Some of us will reach a point where we feel we are burned out on honors. At my wedding, a good friend told me that, if I really loved my new bride, I would not make her spend every waking minute with me during our first year of marriage. This advice shocked me at first, but now it makes sense. If you find that most of your waking hours are spent thinking about honors, then you probably need a temporary break from it—maybe a vacation or just a few days between semesters doing nothing professional at all—so that, after this break, you can evaluate where you are.

GOOD REASONS FOR STEPPING DOWN

Now, we can talk about good reasons to step down as director. Samuel Schuman published an excellent article for *Honors in Practice* last year that addresses this topic. The reasons that we will discuss here include resources, professional advancement and health. In regard to resources, you might take a look at programs at peer institutions and determine whether your level of support is in line with the norm. If there are clear discrepancies and nobody wants to do anything about them come budget time, maybe you do need to start thinking about stepping down. First, however, give yourself a finite period of time for the administration to come up with funds. Provided that your program is growing well, two budget cycles should be enough to determine whether the resources are coming or not. If you fail on the first cycle, then you can consider restructuring your arguments in your next budget request; after all, insanity is doing the same thing twice and expecting different results.

Another good time for stepping down is when honors is getting in the way of your professional advancement. If you find yourself getting further and further behind in salary or promotions because of what you are doing in honors, then it might be time to step down. Again, make sure that you first have considered and exercised ways to incorporate your honors work into your academic career.

The most important reason for stepping down is that your health is beginning to suffer. If you have taken some time off and still find yourself run down more often than before you took the honors position, then take the time to examine your situation. If the job is taking too much out of you personally, perhaps you need to do something else.

BOWING OUT GRACEFULLY

My drama instructor once told us that our entrance on stage would often be eclipsed by our exit, and this is certainly true with how you step down as director. The resignation letter, timing of the announcement, and possible counter offers are serious matters. The resignation letter can benefit from Internet resources; plenty of good websites out there discuss how to draft resignation letters. You want to end on a good note, so this is probably not the time to complain about the honors situation. If you have already told the administration that the program lacks sufficient funding and you need more direct

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support, then you do not need to say it again. Your letter needs to include the effective date, benign but plausible reasons for stepping down, and a thank you for the opportunity to work for a worthy cause. Giving a one-semester notice for stepping down may be appropriate in some cases, but you should consider providing a two-semester notice; this will help ease the transition for the new director, and it will help prevent the search committee from having to scramble to find your replacement (Schuman 2009).

When you do make the announcement public, timing is everything. Make sure that the people who deserve to know about your resignation before the public announcement are told beforehand; these people should include at least your academic department head, honors advisory council, and honors staff. Ideally, all of these conversations should occur within a couple of days to assure that the word does not leak out before all of these important people know. Your honors students need to know before the decision is made public, but try to avoid announcing it to them until your resignation letter has been accepted; it is always possible that the administration will come back with a counter offer that you can't refuse.

You need to be ready for a counter offer. The administration may come back and ask you to stay longer, or they may ask what they need to do to keep you at the helm. You need to know under what special set of circumstances you would be willing to remain as director. Again, the resignation should not be a tool to get what you want for you or for the program. On the other hand, if the administration asks you what it would take to entice you to stay on, you want to be prepared to tell them. You also need to be prepared for your supervisor to accept the letter politely and wish you the best of luck. A good supervisor will likely see your resignation coming and be ready to move on.

YOUR REPLACEMENT

Another important point that some directors do not consider before they step down is the issue of their replacement. You may or may not be asked to choose your successor, and most administrative models suggest that the successor should be chosen by somebody else. I tend to agree with these models, but in some unique situations the outgoing director is asked to select or at least recommend a replacement. If you have not been asked to get involved in the selection process, leave it that way. Usually you should not insert yourself into the conversation or tell the selection committee whom they should pick. You may not be happy with the person chosen, but you relegated that decision when you stepped down; you need to respect the decision that the selection committee makes. Finally, make sure that you do everything possible to help your replacement be successful (Schuman), thus demonstrating your continued support of the program and making your transition into “normal” academic life easier for you. Typically you will need to spend significant time with your replacement explaining operational procedures or decisions.

AFTER YOU STEP DOWN

Important considerations after you step down include how to handle changes within the program, rumors, student complaints about the program, and being tapped for another position; you also need to consider how to handle your emotional response to stepping down. You may find it distasteful or hard to believe, but your successor is going to make changes in the program. If you are asked your opinions about these changes, you want to express them in a professional and socially acceptable manner. (“What the heck are you thinking?” is not socially acceptable). You made changes to the program while you were director, so it is unreasonable to think that *everything* is going to stay the same.

You may also find yourself having to deal with campus rumors and student complaints about the program after you step down. If you are asked about a rumor concerning the program that you have insight on, then consider the ramifications for both yourself and the program before you discuss the topic publicly. Similarly, you may be confronted with student complaints about the program (Schuman 2009). If you were doing your job right as director, you formed at least a few strong relationships with your honors students. Some of these students may approach you to discuss or complain about something in the program. Your best response is to encourage them to talk to the new director or to talk to staff in the program. You do not want to undermine the program director or honors staff by being negative or, even worse, giving an uninformed opinion. Depending on your relationship with the new director, you may be able to pull her or him aside and mention the concern; if you choose this course, then treat the situation delicately, especially during the first semester or so after you stepped down.

After you step down, you might well be tapped for something else, as I was. The announcement about my stepping down was only three days old when somebody asked me if I could serve on a very demanding committee. Some people may think that you chose the position of honors director because you love doing service work. Since my major reason for stepping down was to pursue scholarly interests, the explanation of my decision to decline the committee position did not entail a long discussion. Similarly, you should have an answer to this question before you are asked so that you do not end up taking on unwanted responsibilities.

One of my greatest surprises has been how emotional stepping down is for some directors. In much the same way that you grieve other losses in your life, you may find yourself second-guessing your decision or irrationally reacting to changes in the program after you stepped down. Accepting the fact that the decision has been made and trying to move forward is better than dwelling on it. If it was a mistake to step down, then you have the opportunity to learn from your mistake.

SETTING THE STAGE FOR RETURNING TO HONORS

Returning to honors is probably the last thing on your mind if you are considering stepping down, but you may want to leave the honors door open for a return in the future. If you step down gracefully, handle issues tactfully with the new director, and avoid rumors and student complaints, a future return may be a viable option. You want to make sure that you take the time to update your *curriculum vitae* while honors is fresh in your mind. You can also review the job postings on the NCHC website for honors director and dean positions. You might want to examine these announcements right after you step down to see what other skill sets you would need to acquire in the event you decide to return. You may also want to maintain contact with your honors colleagues. Granted, you left your position, but this does not mean that you need to forego all things honors. In fact, staying in touch with honors colleagues has proven to be healthy for me personally. A few of our conversations have affirmed my decision to step down, and I have also been able to help some directors with their problems.

CONCLUSION

Stepping down or quitting is never an easy task. You need to verify that your decision is made rationally and for the right reasons. You want to carry your head high throughout the process and not allow yourself to think that the decision is irreversible. Since no administrative position is a lifetime appointment, you can take comfort in the fact that, at some time, everybody has to step down.

REFERENCE

Schuman, Sam. (2009). Ending in Honors. *Honors in Practice*. 5: 19–25.

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