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Preparing a Master Plan for an Honors College

JOHN R. VILE

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My experience as an honors dean, like my previous experience as a departmental chair, is that it is easier to spend time putting out fires than engaging in long-term planning. The myriad daily tasks tempt administrators to succumb to the “the tyranny of the now.” We almost always have classes to schedule and teach, books and articles to write and edit, students to advise, scholarship applications to proof, theses to read, special events to publicize, committee meetings to attend, building tours and speeches to give, students to recruit, conferences to attend, and numerous other worthy tasks that call for immediate attention.

I became dean of an honors college in 2008. However we prize it, the college is undoubtedly similar to many others. We developed from a program that the university established in 1973, became a separate college in 1998, and moved into our own building in 2004. We serve about 750 total students in a large state university that now enrolls more than 25,000 students. We have identified our goal as “providing an ivy league type education” within this larger state university context. To complete our program, students take 31 of 120 hours in honors classes, where we handpick faculty and limit enrollments. The capstone of the honors degree is a thesis, which students generally write at the end of their junior or beginning of their senior year. We also print a literary magazine and newsletter, and we offer a lecture series and other special events, scholarships, awards, study abroad opportunities, and other perks for our students.

Shortly after I became dean, our university president asked me to develop a two-year, five-year, and ten-year plan for our honors college. Although I did not initially relish this task, I ultimately found that the process helped direct my attention and that of the honors college to longer-term goals and helped focus the attention of our president and university leaders on our key programs. I also learned the value of gathering data from multiple sources and involving key constituencies in the process. We ultimately concluded that we should continue to engage in long-term planning, with or without future presidential directives.

The *content* of individual master plans varies from institution to institution and program to program and depends heavily on such factors as the selectiveness of the institution, the number of students enrolled in honors programs, the

availability of physical facilities, the adequacy of funding, and the presence or absence of administrative support. By contrast, some aspects of the *process* of such planning are likely to apply across institutions. No process can guarantee a perfect outcome, but inattention to relevant sources of information and constituencies is likely to lead to the articulation of unsupportable or unsustainable goals, which have little long-term value.

GETTING STARTED

Having served as the author of the university's most recent master plan, I knew that whatever changes were proposed would work best if they were aligned with the three major goals of Middle Tennessee State University. These goals, which are similar to those at comparable universities, are pursuing academic quality, promoting student-centered learning, and promoting partnerships. While all the goals are applicable throughout the university, the first two goals seemed particularly suited to the honors college.

I had worked closely with an individual in the provost's office on the master plan and knew that she had also worked on the two previous ones. I began by consulting her. Although she had a number of useful suggestions, she was most helpful in alerting me to various constituencies that I should consider. These included students and faculty in the honors college; staff members within the college, including an associate dean and a former dean who was spending two post-retirement years helping with development; members of our honors council and our board of visitors; alumni; and the larger university community. My contact in the provost's office also urged us to tie our report both to internally collected data within the honors college and data about larger national trends. Both sets of data ultimately proved helpful in situating our master plan within an overall context.

We found two national reports to be especially useful. The first was a study that the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) conducted. The 2008 report observed that "student experiences and outcomes are more varied among students within institutions than among institutions" (6). Indeed, it found that "less than 10% of the total variation in effective educational practices is attributable to institutions. The lion's share is among students within institutions" (7). This survey makes a powerful argument for the value of developing and/or maintaining a high-quality signature program at a public institution that exists primarily to serve the general needs of students within the state and region. This argument was hardly news to those of us in the honors college but was important to reiterate in a report that other constituencies would read.

Members of our board of visitors had expressed great interest in the reasons that honors students choose either to come to our institution or to go elsewhere. As we worked on our plan, we found that a 2008 report by Lipman Hearne on *High-Achieving Seniors and the College Decision* provided special insights into the factors that generally influence such students and thus the areas we should emphasize to attract them.

IDENTIFYING TRENDS

I was privileged to become dean of a program that had been in existence for thirty-five years at a university that is preparing to celebrate its centennial. I thought it was important to begin the master plan with some background information that included this history, laid out current admission and graduation requirements, and delineated special events that the college sponsored as well as enrollment and graduation trends.

Gathering this information helped me spot some trends that I had not previously identified or had only vaguely sensed. I knew, for example, that one of our most difficult tasks lay in increasing the number of honors theses and honors graduates, and I was pleased to find that we raised our average number of graduates from seven in 2003–2004 to thirty in 2008–2009. Partly because of a scholarship program that we had initiated two years previously for incoming students who pledged to complete the program, we were fairly confident that this number would continue to increase. Indeed, one of our challenges may well be how to continue effective supervision of an increased number of such manuscripts.

I was less aware of enrollment trends. The honors college had fairly steadily increased both the total number of students enrolled and the total number of seats filled for several years leading up to the 2005 opening of the new building; during this time, the dean had undoubtedly considered numbers to be especially important in justifying the new construction. Enrollment had begun to drop in the fall of 2005, however, and had continued to decline through the fall of 2008, when the president asked that we do the study. This decline in enrollment corresponded to an increase in admission standards, which undoubtedly strengthened the reputation of the program but also alerted us to a problem that we might not have identified without reviewing the data. Partly because of our study for the master plan, we have implemented changes that include adding new class sections. These changes have turned the numbers in a positive direction without sacrificing quality.

Working on the project helped us realize that our data on graduates was not as strong as it should be. Although we surveyed students after they defended their theses, this sometimes occurred almost a full year before they graduated, making it difficult to say exactly what percentage of students were going to graduate or professional schools. This absence of important information prodded us to make some changes in the way we collect such data for the future.

WHERE WE STOOD NATIONALLY

Honors directors and deans often concentrate on the perceived strengths or weaknesses of their own programs without necessarily knowing how their programs compare to others. In other circumstances, we could have sought NCHC site visitors to help with our assessment, but the university president had given us a relatively tight deadline to prepare a report, and, with the budget situation we faced, the time was not propitious to spend money on outside consultants.

PREPARING A MASTER PLAN FOR AN HONORS COLLEGE

If correctly handled, a master plan is helpful not only for identifying goals within the honors college but also for educating external communities about the college and how it compares to honors colleges in other institutions. Our college had long been working to achieve the standards outlined in the National Collegiate Honors Council's "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program" and "Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors College," and we realized that publicizing this information could be useful to outside constituents. By showing that the college met each of the eleven criteria that the NCHC had established for a fully developed honors college, we were able to inspire pride and confidence in our program by demonstrating that our college already met established benchmarks. These standards would undoubtedly be even more helpful for individuals in less-established programs who are seeking to raise their existing program to the next level.

GETTING INPUT

One of the sources we used in planning for the future consisted of surveys of students who had written theses over the past four years. This survey included information on the following: the number of hours that students worked outside of school and their reasons for doing so; students' plans for post-graduation; and their satisfaction with aspects of the university in general and the honors college in particular. A fairly high number of our students reported that, while in school, they had to work in order to meet basic needs; this fact indicated a need for additional scholarship support. Most of our students were pleased with their honors classes and their honors advisor. Almost all of our students reported that small class sizes—we cap lower-division classes other than our lecture series at twenty and upper-division classes at fifteen—were important to them, and an even higher number thought that the quality of their education was either outstanding or very good.

While such a retrospective analysis of our program was important, we also surveyed existing students and other relevant constituencies. To this end, we developed a master survey (see Appendix), which we distributed to current honors students, honors alumni, members of the honors faculty, members of our board of visitors, past honors administrators, and select high school counselors.

Despite a number of contacts, response rates from alumni and board members (some of whom had pushed for such a plan) were relatively meager. Although this response was disappointing, it was not out of line with similar surveys, and we eventually concluded that the response rate did not stem from disinterest in the college but from an inability to judge day-to-day aspects of a program in which many of the targeted groups were not directly involved. We were able to increase the number of student responses by handing out surveys in a number of classes rather than relying only on mailings or e-mail correspondence.

We asked open-ended questions about the greatest strengths and weakness of our program, our most immediate priorities and long-term goals, and

perceived measures of progress. We also made a list of about a dozen priorities that individuals had suggested for the college and asked respondents to rank them as low, medium, or high priorities. Respondents were understandably concerned about the financial viability of the honors college at a time of national economic decline and looming state budget cuts. Perhaps largely because students constituted a majority of our respondents, the highest priority that they identified was increasing the number of honors scholarships and honors graduates. Large numbers also favored increasing study-abroad partnerships (something we had already begun to do) and partnerships with other honors programs.

By contrast, some responded almost incredulously to the idea that we might consider starting a university press. We ultimately concluded that such concerns were directed more to the expense of the program and its placement within the honors college than to the merit of the idea itself. Perhaps again guided by financial concerns, some respondents thought that we should convert our literary magazine to an on-line format. Although we ultimately rejected the idea, we have applied it to a science journal that we subsequently adopted. Despite major efforts that we had made to publicize the college, student respondents continued to indicate that our program was not as well-publicized or as well-recognized as it should be, a problem with which we continue to struggle.

Responses to open-ended questions were not always as positive as I might have hoped. I learned that members of my own staff preferred to have more regular meetings and from some current scholarship recipients that they thought I was meddling a bit too much in their curriculum. I could easily remedy the first concern, and, although I thought the latter concern was unfounded, it proved helpful in allowing me to assess my work in my first year as dean, ultimately helping me be more sensitive to student concerns.

WRITING AND ORGANIZING THE MASTER PLAN

As the dean facing a relatively short deadline, I took primary responsibility for writing the document but invited input from others. The former honors dean, who shares my own love of writing and is a particularly good wordsmith, gave the document a close and able reading. An administrative assistant proved especially valuable. Her contributions included gathering background information for appendices; formulating an attractive cover, which featured our gold honors medallion; binding and helping to organize the report; and compiling charts of enrollment trends, graduation rates, and responses to our surveys for use in our appendices.

We ultimately divided the report into five major parts and eight appendices, which we prefaced with an outline. Part I provided background concerning the college's history, the curriculum, enrollment and graduation trends, and university and alumni support. Part II focused on the overall goals of the university and the specific goals of the honors college. Part III listed NCHC standards and examined the degree to which the college was meeting them.

PREPARING A MASTER PLAN FOR AN HONORS COLLEGE

Part IV emphasized the relationship between the university and the honors college. Part V listed goals for the first two years, years three through five, and years six through ten. Finally, the appendices provided information on a proposed new scholarship, members of our board of visitors, enrollments, and thesis production. It also included a copy of the survey instrument that we used to generate information, responses to survey questions, and information we had gleaned from exit surveys of thesis writers.

WHAT WE PUT WHERE

The most important part of our report focused on delineating goals for the next two years, five years, and ten years.

1. The First Two Years

During preparation of the report, it became obvious that, with the current economy, our university, like other state institutions, would be facing financial exigencies in the coming years. Indeed, as we were preparing the report, we learned that projected revenue had declined to the point where the university foundation would not be paying dividends on foundation accounts for scholarships for the next year. Raising funds for this shortfall became a top priority that we highlighted in a telethon in which we participated shortly after writing our master plan.

Given survey responses, we formulated two new scholarship programs—in addition to our current Buchanan Scholars Program—that we would like to implement in the first two years. In the second of these years, we will have a full cohort of Buchanan Scholars, twenty students in each class who receive full scholarship support for four years in return for enrolling in the program and maintaining progress toward an honors degree. Because we believe that this program is so integral to increasing the number of students who write theses and graduate with honors, we proposed a program that would provide additional support for twenty more scholars who are willing to make a similar commitment.

The college had already been taking steps to emphasize leadership by and among honors students, and we stressed the importance of elevating this goal as a priority. Identifying this emphasis helped us recognize the importance of the institute for leadership excellence that we had previously offered, that we have continued for an additional summer, and for which we are now seeking additional funding. The report also highlighted efforts we were making to establish a campus chapter of Rotoract and a Leadership Circle, which has subsequently applied for membership in Omicron Delta Kappa, a national honor society that emphasizes both scholarship and leadership.

As we prepared the master plan, we recognized that the honors college should be intimately involved in the university's centennial celebration in

2011. We proposed offering a lecture series on the university's history, which we implemented this fall, and using college resources to help individuals who were working on books on the subject. Other short-term goals included increasing publicity about the honors college, developing a program to recruit more transfer students, creating language halls in the honors dorm, and hiring a fundraiser. At the time we wrote the report, our previous dean was coordinating these efforts, and we proposed that the university follow his tenure with another individual who could devote efforts to this task. Although the university may no longer have funds for this appointment, we were able to highlight the college's commitment to fundraising.

2. Goals for Years Three to Five.

Goals that we identified for years three through five include continuations of programs that we hope to implement within the first two years: new scholarships and increased numbers of honors graduates; continued improvement of our award-winning literary magazine; and endowed professorships, joint faculty appointments, or exchanges with other honors colleges to meet the needs of our growing program.

3. Goals for Years Six to Ten

A major contribution for our new building marked the transition of our honors program to an honors college. Our university recently refurbished a dormitory for honors students, which our students enjoy, but it is located at the other end of campus. Our university master plan calls for constructing a more expansive living/learning center closer to the college with offices and residential faculty who can tie the structure more intimately to the honors college. As much as we wanted to put this initiative at the head of our agenda, it would likely require another major donor or set of donors, and existing economic realities make locating such a donor in the short run a relatively unlikely prospect. We recognized that putting such a project even in a period six to ten years away would not make it a reality, but we thought it important to include it in the plan that board members and alumni read. We made a point of emphasizing that this project could be moved forward in time should a donor step forward. Coincidentally, we mentioned that although the honors building had been named, the honors college had not, and we indicated that the university would work with donors interested in naming rights for themselves or their relatives.

We also suggested that, if overall university standards improve and enrollments are healthy, we might need to raise honors admission standards concomitantly. We further emphasized the need to reconsider staffing and other needs during this time.

CIRCULATING THE REPORT

Once we had completed a draft report, we sent copies to all members of the board, distributed copies to members of the honors council, and to other interested groups. We got relatively few responses, but we considered them all. We learned the wisdom of sending draft copies of the document when a prominent donor called to say that we seemed to be soliciting contributions to name a building that had already been named for his father rather than for the college that had not been named for anyone. Fortunately, we had already included language indicating our appreciation for the building donors, and I was able to explain our simple mistake and correct it in the final copy. Still, the experience highlighted the need to choose words with care and the importance of circulating drafts prior to issuing the final document.

I was especially pleased to receive a very positive response from the university president to the report since I knew from my experience heading up the university master plan that he read such reports closely and would not approve projects that he did not think were workable or to which he was not personally committed.

After getting approval from the provost and the president, we mailed final copies of the report to members of our board as part of a larger informational strategy that we have employed to send each year a variety of materials, including two newsletters and two issues of our literary magazine, to friends and board members. We have subsequently used the master plan as a point of discussion at our annual board meeting.

LESSONS LEARNED

Our master plan helped us think about the future and inform key constituents, both inside and outside the university, where we are headed. We have also learned that even a report soliciting input from a variety of sources cannot anticipate all the important issues and will require ongoing modification.

Although we attributed declining enrollments to changes in admission standards, we found that we could reverse the trend by being more proactive in recruiting incoming students and by asking departments to schedule more classes. In the summer before our first two years under the new plan, we hosted incoming honors-eligible students and their parents in our building and increased both the percentage of students who chose to enroll in our classes and the average number of courses they took. We have also begun hosting high school students who are participating in our governors' school and other on-campus summer projects, and we will soon be having an open house for high school students on President's Day.

In some cases, we are recognizing that we need to add goals and, if necessary, substitute one goal or set of goals for another. We still hope, for instance, to implement a program for transfer students within our next two years, but recently we learned that support and resources are available for scholarships to

attract students with international baccalaureate diplomas, and we have already implemented these scholarships even though this was not on our original master plan. After writing the report, I also learned that the foundation office was seeking support for a plan for Centennial Scholars, which was very much along the order of the plan I myself had proposed.

Israel's King Solomon opined that "without vision the people perish" (Proverbs 29, 18). Few honors colleges are likely to perish simply because they lack a master plan, but our experience suggests both that it is important to share a vision and that a master plan can be a valuable means of so doing. Such a plan provides a way to transcend day-to-day concerns and concentrate on longer-term goals. A master plan can be particularly useful in dealing with the university foundation office since it provides both a vision and concrete proposals that the office can use when soliciting potential donors.

In writing our report, we learned the importance of gathering data on enrollment and graduation trends, polling a variety of constituencies about their perceptions of college strengths and weaknesses, keeping them informed of our progress, and sharing our vision with them. We situated our college and its development within the larger context of other honors colleges and programs and within the university of which it is a part.

Both because we were acting on the instruction of administrative leaders who have been very committed to our college and because we kept them involved in the process, we believe that we will be able to use the document to remind them of our priorities in the years ahead. At the same time, we will work to see that our plan does not limit future projects but serves as a baseline against which to measure our progress.

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APPENDIX

SURVEY FOR PLANNING FOR THE MTSU HONORS COLLEGE

Dear Friend of the Honors College:

After meeting with members of the Board of Visitors, President McPhee has asked the College to develop a Master Plan that will establish goals over the next ten years. The following survey is designed to allow you to participate in this process. We welcome your suggestions and thank you in advance for your help.

1. I am:

- (a) A current honors student
- (b) An honors alum
- (c) A member of the honors faculty
- (d) A member of the Honors Board of Visitors
- (e) A past honors administrator
- (f) A high school counselor
- (g) Other _____

2. In my judgment, the greatest strengths of the MTSU Honors College are:

3. In my judgment, the greatest weaknesses of the MTSU Honors College are:

4. I think the most **immediate** priority of the Honors College should be:

5. I think the most important **long-term goal** of the Honors College should be:

PREPARING A MASTER PLAN FOR AN HONORS COLLEGE

6. I think the most obvious measures of progress in the Honors College are:

7. Below is a list of projects that have been suggested for the honors college. Please indicate by circling one of the responses whether you think each is a low-priority goal, a medium-priority goal, or a high-priority goal.

Constructing a new honors residence hall near the honors college.

Low Medium High.

Creating a study-abroad partnership with a foreign university.

Low Medium High.

Creating a university press.

Low Medium High.

Expanding the current literary magazine, *Collage*.

Low Medium High.

Increasing the number of honors scholarships.

Low Medium High.

Increasing the number of honors graduates

Low Medium High.

Creating endowed professorships within the Honors College.

Low Medium High.

Hiring additional staff to help with advising and scholarships.

Low Medium High.

Providing for future summer leadership institutes for MTSU honors students.

Low Medium High.

Providing leadership institutes for high school students.

Low Medium High.

Increasing the visibility of the Honors College.

Low Medium High.

Successfully nominating a student for a Rhodes Scholarship.

Low Medium High.

Establishing more partnerships with other universities and the community to expand opportunities for honors students.

Low Medium High.

JOHN R. VILE

8. The goals that I would most like to be added to the above list are:

9. Some of the goals listed above are relatively expensive. Please list any individual, agency, or organization that you think might be particularly interested in one or more of these projects and might be willing and able to contribute to it.

10. Do you have anything else that you would like to convey about the current status or the future direction of the Honors College? If you need more space, please continue on the back of this form.

Thanks so much for your help. We will keep you apprised of progress in developing a Master Plan for the Honors College.

