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Spring 2012

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Brian Railsback

Western Carolina University, brailsba@email.wcu.edu

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Railsback, Brian, "Protecting and Expanding the Honors Budget in Hard Times" (2012). *Journal of the National Collegiate Honors Council –Online Archive*. 341.

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Protecting and Expanding the Honors Budget in Hard Times

BRIAN RAILSBACK

WESTERN CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

In difficult budget times, especially at state colleges and universities, honors programs might seem too easy for budget-cutters to reduce, cut, or lose in the shuffle of administrative reorganization. Recent years have been financially perilous and hardly an easy time for honors programs or colleges to increase budgets. Using Western Carolina University (WCU) as a case study, I can nevertheless offer essential strategies to help sustain, preserve, or even expand honors on campuses where tight funding is the “new normal.”

In 1996, the honors program at Western Carolina University (WCU) was nearly dead. For a decade, the program existed in the basement of a building littered with surplus furniture and a few cast-off computers. Honors students numbered seventy-seven in all, with the support of a full-time secretary and a faculty member with half-time course release to serve as director. The program was almost unknown on campus after a succession of directors who sometimes did not last more than a year. Even in good budget years, paltry requests for additional funds for the program were often denied.

Today the program is a thriving honors college, housed in a new \$51 million residential living complex for honors students and supported by a dean and three full-time staff members. While the university’s overall enrollment grew from 6,809 in 1997 to 8,919 by spring 2012, honors enrollment in the same period grew from 77 to 1,326. The standards for admission and retention in the program were raised. The total budget grew by nearly 600%. External revenue generated in that period topped \$250,000. Even in the harsh budget years since 2009, there has been no talk of reducing the size of the college or cutting it; on the contrary, some operating budget cuts will be restored in 2012–13.

Four strategies largely account for the funding and capital increases that grew a nearly dead program into one of the most thriving enterprises on campus.

A SEAT AT THE TABLE

On February 16, 1996, WCU Chancellor John Bardo, in his first year on the job, gave a speech in which he talked about an honors college as a

possibility to help the institution raise academic standards. “An honors college is not just an expansion of an honors program,” he said, “it represents a fundamental commitment of the university to educational excellence.” Not long after, the usual arguments against the establishment of an honors college emerged: there is no need to create a new college; the elitism of such an organization defies democratic ideals; high-achieving students do not need additional resources. Many faculty members and deans agreed on one point in particular: the university does not need another dean. In response, Chancellor Bardo made a critical point that proved to be true in the quest for increased recurring budget dollars: *honors will thrive only if its leadership has a seat at the table where budget decisions are made—that means an honors dean who sits on the council of deans.*

INTEGRATION INTO THE UNIVERSITY

The WCU Honors College was established on July 1, 1997. In the vigorous debate of the faculty senate before passage of the plan to create the college, it became clear that honors had to integrate with the university; the underlying fear was that the college would become insulated and, in fact, isolate high-achieving students. The new dean searched for a university-wide niche for the honors college and discovered a perfect one: undergraduate research. The university lacked a coordinated approach to undergraduate research, and management of interdisciplinary undergraduate research programs at WCU could be the role of the new college. To fully integrate with the campus, the dean decided to open the honors research programs to all undergraduates who could qualify. Over time, honors at WCU became associated with the university’s successful undergraduate research programs; for example, WCU had little or no presence at the National Conference on Undergraduate Research before the honors college but since 2005 has been among the top ten universities in papers accepted at NCUR. If the university cuts the honors budget too drastically, one of its high-profile successes beyond the honors college will be hurt as well. *The more integrated the honors program or college is with top university programs or priorities, the harder it is to cut the honors budget.*

STUDENT LEADERSHIP

Honors students are powerful allies if they are allowed a significant leadership role in the honors program or college. In 1997, the new honors college at WCU took a radical path, establishing the dean’s only week-to-week, on-campus advisory board composed entirely of honors students. Honors students, through the Honors College Board of Directors, are involved in all policies of the college, including admissions, commencement, community

relations, curriculum, programming, and scholarships. The more students are allowed to lead the honors program or college, the more pride they take in their organization. Innovations that resulted from student leadership at WCU helped fuel the college's rapid enrollment growth and improved retention of high-achieving students. With 14% of the total student population at WCU in honors, their collective voice has become powerful. For example, the honors residence was originally budgeted at \$18 million, but a strong student voice resulted in changes that greatly improved and augmented the original plan. With strong student participation and advocacy in budget discussions, the honors director or dean can more easily make the case that honors is an important university priority. Strong, effective student support depends on real student leadership. *The greater the honors students' sense of ownership in the program or college, the more difficult it becomes to cut the honors budget.*

DEVELOP PRIVATE FUNDING

Given the situation since 2009, significant budget increases for higher education are unlikely through the traditional means of increasing state revenue or tuition hikes. In times of budget cutting, honors programs or colleges need to rely on external dollars to sustain or expand programming. Donors with the capacity to help must be engaged in the honors enterprise, and, like students, they need a voice in the honors program or college. *The best way to achieve significant donor interest in honors is to create an external advisory board.* Our board is made up of the honors dean and, for the rest, potential donors from outside the university. Donors might be alumni or interested members of the community, people who want to help the institution's high-achieving students and who want to be part of a prestigious organization. The WCU Honors College has had an external advisory board since 2005. Its members have donated or pledged over \$200,000 to the college, taking special interest in a grant program for honors students going abroad, which cannot be funded with North Carolina state dollars. The board has allowed the college to sustain or expand programs even during years of budget cutting.

Implementing these four strategies requires long-range planning. The two that were most difficult for us were installing an honors dean and creating an effective external advisory board, strategies that many larger and richer institutions have been able to implement for quite some time. The rags-to-riches story at Western Carolina University demonstrates that a wide range of honors programs or colleges can become essential to their home institutions and can thrive even in hard times.

REFERENCE

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The author may be contacted at

brailsba@wcu.edu.