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Nothing Succeeds Like Failure: Managing Loss in a Renascent Honors Program

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CAMERON UNIVERSITY

INTRODUCTION

I work at Cameron University, a regional institution in Oklahoma that will be celebrating its centennial in 2008. Our administrators see the revivification of the Cameron University Honors Program as an important component of their "Centennial Plan," and they have appointed me to make that revivification happen.

I benefited greatly from reviewing Dean Sederberg's observations concerning the South Carolina Honors College. Initially, I suspected that his insights would be primarily useful for those in charge of far more developed programs than the one I have been tasked with directing, but from the moment I encountered his warning against "'biggering' for the sake of 'biggering,'" I realized that I could count myself as a member of his implied audience.

As I hope to have indicated with my title, my purpose here is partly to engage, amplify, and comment on some of Sederberg's points in "Nothing Fails Like Success: Managing Growth in a Highly Developed Honors Program." However, the fact that my program includes fewer than 100 students (whereas Sederberg oversaw the growth of the SCHC from 700+ to 1200+ students) suggests that I might be looking at some of the points in his article through the wrong end of his telescope. I suspect that my remarks will primarily be useful to directors of honors programs at community colleges or to fledgling directors or to directors of fledgling programs. And I won't pretend that I expect them to be useful in and of themselves. I can only hope that they will spark a conversation that will help those of us who are finding our way to do so as successfully as Sederberg has.

THE PRESSURES TO GROW

Sederberg's description of the "reverse Groucho Marx effect" is spot on. Counter-intuitive though it may sound, one of the reasons that we have

trouble maintaining our population in the CUHP is that our admissions process is so extraordinarily painless. Students are invited into the program based on ACT scores, GPA. and class rank, but we have been reluctant to ask them to fill out an application or submit a writing sample or go through an interviewing process because we were afraid that such hurdles might put off some of our best students.

Certainly, there are some students who are in the program now who wouldn't be if they had been required to write an application essay. But there are other students whom we might like to recruit who would be more receptive to us precisely because of such demands. If I can add a sort of postscript to Sederberg's point about people wanting "to be in a club that won't have them," it would run something like this: "We won't have *any* people lining up for admission to the program until we start turning *some* people away."

The difficulty here is that one of the easiest ways for the administration to assess my performance as a director is to count the number of students involved in the program. As certain as I may be that raising standards next semester will pay dramatic dividends three or four years from now, I might not be around in three years to capitalize on that development if the new application process results in severe attrition for the CUHP.*

I am attempting to address the problem of potential attrition through two means: 1) curricular rejuvenation; and 2) recruitment. The CUHP is currently offering team-taught courses for the first time in its history, and students who never paid attention to the CUHP before are dropping by my office and stopping me between classes to find out about "that class with all the different professors." I am also taking it upon myself to visit area high schools and inform graduating seniors about the CUHP. I hope to generate enough new interest in the program to offset any losses that we can expect from the new (more demanding) application process, but I cannot comment at this point on how dramatic those losses will be or how fruitful my recruitment efforts will be or how much of the campus "buzz" about the new course offerings will translate to students asking to be admitted to the program.

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* Lest I be misconstrued here as suggesting that I am supervised by mindless bureaucrats, I want to stress the point that I respect and get along perfectly well with all of the administrators who supervise and/or work with me in my capacity as CUHP Director. However, since academe is no stranger to administrative turnover, I am concerned about my ability to account for my decisions to potential newcomers to Cameron's administration. Much can be done on the basis of an understanding with one's supervisor, but when one's supervisor moves on (or the responsibility of supervision is shifted to a new office), a new understanding has to be negotiated—often in light of precisely such hard facts as the number of students one's program appears to be benefiting.

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MANAGING LOSS:
SOME CONSIDERATIONS AND A QUESTION

In his section on "Managing Growth," Sederberg reflects on the concept of "poorly managed growth." I am currently attempting to persuade various levels of the administration at Cameron that we can distinguish "poorly managed loss" from "properly managed loss."

Sederberg sees the tweaking of the admissions process and the leveraging of resources as linked in his discussion of growth. My fear is that they could be too closely linked at my institution. Will the limited budget that I have for guest presentations, field trips, various curricular enhancements, and faculty development be reduced if the changes I envision for our admissions process result in a smaller population next year than the one I have this year?

Sederberg was able to generate growing administrative support for a growing program, but is it reasonable for me to expect growing support (or even undiminished support) for a program that is likely to shrink?

I think that expectation can only be reasonable if I can demonstrate that the program is shrinking "well," and I would ask my colleagues at other institutions to respond to this essay with guidelines that they would expect to pass muster with their own supervisors (and perhaps with mine) about how we can tell the difference between a program that is simply dying and one that is managing loss effectively.

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