

Program Excellence versus Program Growth: Must These Goals Conflict?

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Two essays, both published in the fall/winter 2007 *JNCHC* Forum entitled “Managing Growth in Honors,” present conflicting points of view:

As most of us in honors openly or covertly acknowledge, the best friend an honors program can find is the president who embraces advancing the program as a central piece of her/his personal agenda to advance the entire institution. When those stars align, the funding flows. (Lanier 39)

At the last, growth management must be guided by . . . the resource requirements for sustaining excellence . . . [A] highly developed honors program/college must . . . 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 . . . will fall. (Sederberg 26)

Lanier underscores the potential of a president to create beneficial change while Sederberg suggests the risk that such change might undermine an existing university asset. New England University provides a case study of this dynamic in the context of growth in honors; it is a story about the efforts of faculty, students, and staff committed to evoking and sustaining excellence in one honors program to respond to the vision of a new president who placed growing the honors program as one of his highest priorities. This particular presidential initiative—significantly growing the size of an honors program at a major public university—presents an opportunity to analyze one university’s experience of implementing institutional change. Examination of the personalities, process, pitfalls, strategies, and successes in this case study contributes to the scholarly tradition of studying and documenting change in higher education. Conforming to tradition in qualitative research and to at least partially protect the identities of the university and individuals involved in the case study, I have substituted fictional names.

The study of institutional change in higher education is extensive (Alfred; Morrill; Steeples). Scholars have focused on various aspects of university

administration in effecting successful change, including the role of strategic planning (Morrill), the importance of a clearly articulated vision and effective communication of that vision (Duderstadt; Morrill), the recruitment of support from multiple stakeholder groups (Martinez and Wolverton), and dealing with budget reductions (Mathews), among other topics.

Other research focuses on the role of incumbents responsible for initiating or implementing a particular change agenda, especially the role of college and university presidents (Cohen and March; Duderstadt; Eckel and Kezar). A president's leadership or communication style (Alfred), extent of "fit" with institutional culture (Farmer; Martinez and Wolverton), and savvy in navigating a structurally weak position (Cohen and March) can help or hinder the achievement of a president's goals. Far less has been written about the roles of the honors program director and vice provost, but the literature on academic deans bears on these roles. Deans, vice provosts, and honors directors are in quintessential middle-management positions (Buller), advocating for those who report to them while representing the higher-level officers who set limits within which they operate. Their role is a nexus of university organization; they cannot do much by themselves but can be catalysts for realizing the visions of those around them. This case study of the growth of honors at the public flagship New England University (NEU) provides a narrative exemplifying many of the issues of interest to scholars of change in higher education.

BACKGROUND

The story begins in 2007, when President Robert M. Mitchell was appointed fourteenth president of New England University. From his first moments on campus, Mitchell embraced the honors program as a central piece of his agenda to advance the entire institution. At that time, I was a mid-career honors director, having come to NEU five years earlier, in part to strengthen honors following a period of its neglect and underfunding. At my interview, student leaders had expressed concern that honors was a program in name only and that the program suffered sorely from a lack of substance.

During my first five years, the honors staff and faculty engaged in considerable efforts to strengthen the program through extensive self-study, planning, and development. This work unfolded in stages. First was a 2002 external program review scheduled soon after my arrival. The visiting experts in honors education submitted a detailed report outlining recommendations for strengthening the program, the first in a series of documents that guided the direction of program development over the following five years. The second stage involved a retreat of faculty, administrators, and students to encourage broader buy-in of the program review recommendations and consider implementation issues. At this fall 2003 two-day retreat, thirty NEU faculty, students, staff, and administrators, joined by four high-level academic consultants, attended sessions discussing our vision for NEU honors, challenges and obstacles to be overcome, honors courses, curriculum and requirements, admissions, diversity, cultivating

student community, advising, and communications to the larger university community. The outcome of this retreat was yet another document detailing major themes and action items.

The contents of these documents crystallized into the third stage, the articulation of our strategic plan. Four major goals of honors were articulated in that plan: challenging academics; a personalized collegiate environment; a community designed for personal, social, and cultural development; and leadership and engagement beyond the classroom. For honors to achieve each goal, the plan articulated specific and implementable program initiatives. For example, to support challenging academics, the program would develop or expand the required honors core curriculum, faculty-taught first-year honors seminars, a student facilitator training program, funded programs for undergraduate research, a required thesis preparation workshop, an office of national scholarships, and additional honors student “perks” including graduate library privileges, higher semester enrollment credit limits, and priority registration. Goal #3, focused on strengthening honors community, included a policy requiring honors housing for all residential first-year students, expansion of upper-class honors housing, a significantly expanded menu of honors co-curricular programming, and growth or development of a vibrant student honors council, peer mentoring organization, and student outreach organization.

To support the honors strategic plan, the central administration provided modest support to enhance curriculum, add staff, increase funding programs, and produce recognition ceremonies. While our funding and staffing did not compare with some of the better-endowed honors programs across the nation, the infusion of funds allowed the program to begin to correct its shortcomings. The program also grew during this period, in part because of the size of the residence hall selected for our freshmen. From 2002 to 2007, the overall program grew from 896 to 1254, a 40% increase. Positive effects of the increased robustness of program elements also became evident in student outcome data. From 2002 to 2007, the percentage of students earning the mid-career honors award increased from 21% to 47%, and the number of graduating students fulfilling all honors requirements, including a thesis, grew from 128 to 186.

THE LURE OF EXPANDED HONORS AS A RECRUITMENT TOOL

From 2002 to 2007, the honors program was not only succeeding in growth and student engagement but was also recruiting more academically qualified students. The word was getting out that NEU honors was an excellent alternative to ivies and other prestigious colleges. Average SAT scores of entering honors students rose despite the program’s bringing in larger freshman classes. Admission to NEU honors became more competitive.

During this period the honors program leadership played the key role in setting admissions targets each year, working collaboratively with the admissions office to recruit the number of entering students the program could

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handle. As the academic quality of our incoming class in honors increased, we increased our benchmarks commensurately to maintain the entering class at approximately the number we wanted. As our benchmarks climbed, applicants who would have been invited into the program a year or two before, excellent students with strong records of service and leadership, were increasingly being passed over for admission. Expecting to be invited into the program, many of these students elected to pass over NEU and matriculate elsewhere. Admission to NEU honors was becoming a differentiator in applicants' perceptions of the attractiveness of the university.

Evidence of this dynamic could be found in the annual yield analyses. Each year, the office of admission compared the number of applicants who matriculated at NEU with the total number of applicants offered admission. Yield proportions would be calculated for groups of applicants categorized by their level of academic preparedness. These data illustrated a drop-off in yield between applicants invited to join the honors program and those who fell immediately below the cut-off and who had not been invited. This observation was further documented through results of our admitted-student survey, which found that, when asked if they would have come to NEU had they not been admitted to honors, about half said "no."

NEU could have improved the yield of these fine but not top students by further increasing the total number admitted to honors in a given year. However, under the previous president's tenure, I never pushed this agenda item because of my concern, articulated by Peter Sederberg, that program quality would suffer. As director, my first priority, as I frequently said in discussions with admissions and enrollment management people, was "delivering on our promises." It was easy to issue letters inviting applicants to join the honors program; all it took was the stationery to print the letters and stamps to mail them. Providing these additional students with the honors-level curriculum, programming, advising, and supervision for their four-year college careers was another thing altogether.

Gregory Lanier, in his article "Growth = Bucks (?)," astutely observes that growth in honors does not generally occur in a linear fashion. Instead, Lanier suggests that "meaningful increases in honors funding come in a series of sporadic quantum jumps," which he terms QJ's: "I would suspect that nearly all honors programs depend on QJ's to support both growth and program enhancement. The sheer number of anecdotal stories of how this or that new president or provost stepped in and doubled or tripled honors funding at this or that institution suggests that QJ's are a common practice in honors" (38). While 2002 to 2007 was certainly a period of significant growth and development for NEU honors, it did not reach the threshold of a Lanier QJ in terms of resources. The administration provided gradual increments of funds and small increases in staffing, but for the most part the organizational chart and resources did not change substantially.

PRESIDENTIAL SUPPORT FOR A QJ

Mitchell began his appointment as the fourteenth president of New England University in September of 2007. Mitchell brought energy and vision as well as deep knowledge and experience with public research universities to his new position. From his arrival on campus, he expressed a special interest in and enthusiasm about honors education. Within his first month on campus, he jumped in to teach an honors first-year seminar, accompanied a busload of honors students on a day-long field trip, keynoted the fall Honors Ceremony, and attended a donor dinner.

The president exuded enthusiasm and eagerness to improve the reputation of NEU in general. He emphasized that NEU was very good but had the potential to be great; with the right planning and strategizing, we could break into the ranks of the top twenty public research universities. Having come from two state universities with very large honors programs, one element of the president's strategy was to increase the number of students admitted to honors.

Conversations about a dramatic increase in the size of NEU honors began early in the president's term. A key player in these conversations was the vice provost for enrollment management, Don Hughes, who had successfully strategized improvements in recruitment and retention of academically prepared and diverse undergraduates and who was given a prominent place at the table. By the second month of the president's new term, Hughes was making a case for honors expansion to retain the "lost tier." Enrollment management staff began to develop estimates of the optimal size of the honors program based on assumptions that significant numbers of this group would attend NEU if they were invited into honors. While estimates varied, claims were made that academically qualified students could be recruited to fill an entering honors class of between 450 and 600 students. Given that our 2007 entering class was 291, admitting at this scale would have constituted an increase of up to 106% in our freshman class.

These proposed increases filled honors program staff and faculty with dread. We were proud of the progress we were making and were worried about our ability to accommodate such rapid and dramatic growth. Would NEU honors mirror the mistakes of small businesses when they grow too large? Would our "product"—and consequent "customer loyalty"—deteriorate in the same way as that of a business that cannot maintain quality control to match its rapid growth?

"TWO-TIER" HONORS: CONCEPT DEVELOPMENT

How would we accommodate these significantly larger numbers of incoming students? Researching models used at Mitchell's former universities, Melinda Markle, the vice provost for undergraduate education, stepped into the conversation. She promoted a "second-tier" honors program as the possible

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solution to the demands for growth. This model had enjoyed success at other institutions, including Mitchell's former Midwestern U., and seemed to be a means to accomplish rapid growth while retaining the integrity of our current honors program. By November of 2007, Mitchell's third month on the job, Markle had developed a draft proposal for a bifurcated honors program in which students would be admitted into one of two tracks: "honors with research" and "honors citizen scholars." In a matter of days the vice provost proposed a tentative budget of \$1.3 million in additional funds to cover expanded honors and another of Mitchell's proposed initiatives, learning communities. It was a back-of-the-envelope attempt, with little specificity as to how this figure had been arrived at or how the money would be spent. The proposed start date for expanded honors was fall 2009, meaning that creating a marketing plan for the new honors model and communicating it to the prospective students who would make up the inaugural class would have to begin immediately.

Markle's two-tier plan was creative as it did not increase demand for what was the most labor-intensive portion of NEU's honors education, honors courses and thesis supervision. In her calculus, both groups would receive some of the perks of honors, including priority registration, honors advising, and special events and programming, but there would be differences in the nature of the curriculum and expectations for each group. The honors research track would retain all the curricular requirements of our current honors program while the citizen scholars would focus more on experiential learning through "service, citizenship, leadership and real-world problem solving." They would live in existing living learning communities for up to two years and be involved in service and experiential learning activities, but they would not enroll in honors classes or conduct an honors thesis.

This concept was fast-tracked. By the third week of November 2007, Markle had distributed her proposal to the leaders of the honors, enrollment management, and student affairs units and asked them to provide feedback within the week. The flurry of emails following Thanksgiving break reflected a general consensus that the two-tier concept might work but that much more serious planning and budgeting would have to be done prior to rolling out this new model. Specific comments about the proposal also mirrored the organizational positions, responsibilities, and interests of the various institutional players. The vice provost for enrollment management was probably the most uniformly positive:

We are prepared to incorporate this exciting new program into our recruitment, marketing, communication, orientation, and registration processes for the class of 2009. . . . I agree there is a lot of work that will need to be completed over the next year to make sure we have the resources, staff and the expanded honors program in place prior to our early action deadline of December 1st."

Student affairs personnel were positive though more cautious regarding the time frame and the need for broader consultation and buy-in. They also raised the issue of whether the proposal blurred distinctions between the honors program and learning communities too much. The vice president for student affairs noted:

I feel NEU can assert itself as a national model in the area of Learning Communities, Honors programs and opportunities for significant involvement for our students, and feel the university has a talented core of staff to lead this forward. . . . I am also asking for an appropriate timeframe for the inclusion of key players that have not yet been fully engaged and to establish the buy in of our faculty, our staff who will carry the burden of the management, and of the students. . . . I am also very interested in understanding the funding sources of these initiatives.”

The dean of students commented similarly:

This is a worthy start on a discussion that I believe will require significantly more time than this timeline allows. . . . I have concerns about the intersection of Citizen Scholars and learning communities, and can envision some real struggles between the principle [sic] players who are responsible for 1) recruiting students into the program, 2) orienting them, 3) registering them, 4) housing them (in LCs), 5) teaching them, and 6) providing the necessary support for them to do this ambitious co-curricular/enrichment agenda.”

As honors program director, I found the concept intriguing. I had researched two-tier programs and had personally spoken with a number of deans and directors at other universities. Informants with experience with two-tier models said that they could be successful in increasing yield while maintaining the quality, prestige, and academic rigor of the honors program. But I also shared others’ concerns: Would there be one type of recognition for completing either the research or citizen scholar track? If so, would students in the research track jump ship mid-stream because they could save time by becoming citizen scholars? Would we be able to counter the negative stigma of being assigned to the second tier? How would this two-track system play with the faculty and staff? How much would such an expansion really cost, and would it be adequately funded?

THE DERAILING OF “TWO-TIER HONORS”

A week after the two-tier proposal was circulated, Melinda Markle and Don Hughes jointly presented it to the president and his staff. I did not attend this meeting, but according to Markle, the response was favorable. She wrote soon after the meeting:

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The President gave a clear Yes and saw the potential for elevating the undergraduate experience. . . . This is tremendously exciting!”

A day later she issued a directive to leaders of the undergraduate education and student affairs units. She asked these units to assess the impacts of the proposal on other undergraduate education units, prepare job descriptions and staffing charts for the expanded units, develop a communications plan, consider assessment issues, and benchmark other two-tier programs. The specificity of the directives suggested that she had received a clear “go ahead” from President Mitchell and that there was agreement on a firm, articulate, fully developed plan that was ready for implementation. Groups were asked to have their work done within two months so that firm budgeting of the expansion could be completed by February 2008.

Within a few days, phone lines were buzzing and emails flying filled with worried comments about this directive. Some asserted that the concept needed far more specifics before it could be implemented. Others argued that a development of this magnitude needed to be communicated more broadly to the university community and more buy-in secured. At this stage, barely three months after Mitchell’s start date, few people outside of the president’s inner circle and a few key mid-level administrators knew anything about the idea. People were also concerned that the \$1.3 million price tag was not based on an articulated plan and had little to do with what the initiative would actually cost. Finally, virtually everyone involved doubted that the work requested could be completed in the two-month timeframe.

As the person who ultimately would be responsible for executing expanded honors, I was concerned that the process was unfolding so rapidly. To buy time and to engage more stakeholders, I suggested to Markle that she impanel a committee with a strong faculty presence to engage in a more deliberative approach to the challenge of expanding the honors program. This group would review previous planning documents and benchmarking data for large honors programs, consider this information in light of NEU culture, and recommend a model based on a minimum of 450 entering honors students. The committee, comprised of senior faculty and administrators and honors staff, met twice, in December 2007 and January 2008, for one full day each month.

Early in the committee’s work, the two-tier concept hit a roadblock. While members acknowledged that this model had been successfully implemented at other universities, they did not favor it for NEU. Members were invested, committed, and proud of the current honors model. They opposed the two-tier approach on three grounds: first, that it would be difficult to counteract the sense that students admitted to the citizen scholar program were not as elite as those admitted to honors; second, that it would be extremely difficult to create and enforce requirements for citizen scholars; and third, that there would be equity issues in graduating both groups as “honors scholars,” as was the president’s desire, given the vastly different requirements for the two groups. There was quickly a strong consensus to reject the two-tier model.

Once the concept of two-tier honors was rejected, most of the retreat time was spent on what a dramatically expanded single honors program would look like and how it could be implemented. Many of the issues covered by the 2002 program review report and 2003 retreat committee report were revisited but with a focus on how challenges would be met with a substantially larger student population. After extensive discussions, the members focused on the future and the need for a real “Quantum Jump” from central administration. The report concluded:

The retreat committee’s vision of NEU’s future Honors effort will require new office, classroom, and residential space; a significant increase in staffing; new curricular options; resources for a significantly larger menu of honors courses; mechanisms for assessment and quality assurance; mechanisms for recognition of faculty teaching and other efforts in the Honors program; and more. These elements of the expanded Honors program will need to be carefully planned, with timetables and budgets attached to their implementation. This is a multi-year endeavor.” (Expanded Honors Program Planning Committee Report and Recommendations 8)

When Markle and the provost were informed that the planning committee had rejected the two-tier model, they were surprisingly sanguine. Central administration seemed to be perfectly willing to dispense with two-tier honors despite the speed with which the concept had been promoted so long as “expanded honors” was still on the table. By then, I was probably one of the few who continued to favor two-tier honors as a cost-effective and realistic strategy for dealing with the scale of growth being prescribed. Dropping this model would place significantly more pressure on honors staff and faculty to ramp up the curriculum and services of our current program for a significantly larger population. And I worried about whether we would obtain the budget to support this expansion.

“EXPANDED HONORS” IS SET IN GEAR

By early 2008, President Mitchell and other highly placed administrators began to pepper their remarks with references to expanding the size of the honors program. In speeches to alumni groups, the university senate, and faculty gatherings, the president and provost echoed this intention as one of their strategies for improving the quality of the undergraduate population. These statements were met with mostly negative or at best mixed reactions from faculty. Faculty skepticism stemmed primarily from concern that the quality of the program would be watered down and that demands on them for more honors courses and thesis supervision would increase beyond their ability to meet them. As early as January 2008, during a university senate presentation of a draft of the new university academic plan, the provost “mentioned a potential

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enhancement of the honors program designed to encourage more students of high academic ability to enroll. One of the senators commented on the proposed honors program change and termed it a more ‘relaxed’ than ‘enhanced’ program.” (University Senate Minutes, January 28, 2008.)

Meanwhile, the numerical expansion of the honors program was already a reality. In sharp contrast to pre-Mitchell years, the goal for the 2008 entering honors class was determined by Don Hughes and his staff with minimal input from honors. The target for 2008 was set at 340, forty more students than the year before, and for 2009 the enrollment target was 400, or sixty freshmen more than in 2008. Moreover, during the 2008–09 academic year, the final version of the university’s new academic plan was published. Predictably, expanding the size of the honors program was one of the goals for undergraduate education. Unexpectedly, by 2014 the size of the incoming class, according to the plan, would be 550, a full hundred students per entering class over the number we had previously anticipated.

WOULD WE GET OUR QUANTUM JUMP?

Throughout 2008, the budget climate within the state and nation worsened, culminating in the stock market crash in the fall and the subsequent economic recession. Following closely on the heels of the financial meltdown, widespread cost-cutting measures were introduced at NEU. Departments faced a budget rescission, hiring and travel freezes, and other measures that made life difficult for faculty and for school and college administrators.

I had to navigate an increasingly complicated political landscape during this period. While the budgets of most university units were being cut, the president and provost continued to emphasize that the honors program was growing and that they needed to allocate funds to manage its larger student population even if it meant taking funds away from departments, schools, and colleges. During discussions of the budget cuts in the fall of 2008, the president explicitly cited redirection of funds to support the expansion of the honors program as one reason the rescission had to be as large as it was. Predictably, this picture—that honors would grow at the expense of academic departments—embittered and incensed many faculty members.

I knew it was necessary to be publicly supportive of the president and his agenda. At the same time the success of any honors program is inextricably linked to the support it receives from the faculty. I attempted to be collegial with the departments and faculty, reminding them that I recognized that they had many other agendas besides serving honors students. What I could not speak about publicly was that, despite the clear plans to grow the program substantially, funds to support that growth had still not been committed. Meanwhile, the gears driving the major expansion of honors were already turning. We were blatantly aware of the obvious: increases in the incoming classes would create additive impacts as the larger number of students in each new class stacked on

top of returning larger classes. To ensure program quality, we had to have additional resources.

In conversations with supportive faculty and honors staff colleagues, we strategized about how we might break the status quo and obtain a firm budgetary commitment. What we decided was that we needed a more concrete and detailed business plan. During September of 2008, my staff and I focused our attention on creating a plan for staffing, curriculum, programming, and space—with budget figures attached—to accommodate the increased numbers in the honors program for each fiscal year from 2009–10 through 2017–18. The model was built on an incoming class of 400 for 2009 and 450 for each subsequent class. We based these numbers on a request to the provost to support capping freshman enrollment at 450 for several years so that the effects of growth could be assessed before continuing to grow. Unofficially, the provost assured us that he would not hold us to the 550 number specified in the university academic plan.

The most intensive and time-consuming work was done in two areas, curriculum and staffing. For the curriculum, we began with baseline estimates of the number of honors sections that had been taught in calendar year 2008 without requiring compensation from honors. The convention at NEU was for departments to offer a certain number of honors courses, just as they offered general education classes, without extra compensation from honors, but the honors program had started supplementing course offerings in high-demand departments, distributing the relatively small sum of \$164,000 annually. Starting from that baseline, we estimated the number of additional sections of courses that would be necessary to accommodate the increases in our student population each year. Then we estimated the cost of each of these additional honors sections. We estimated that each section would cost approximately \$8000 in 2008 dollars, an amount in excess of a half-time teaching assistant and slightly less than the estimated cost of one course taught by a non-tenure-track full-time instructor. In the case of some departments that taught low-enrollment courses, such as the freshman English course required of all students, we reduced the reimbursement amount because we assumed that there would be cost-neutral displacement from non-honors to honors sections.

To accommodate increased student demand for thesis/project advisors, we estimated a baseline of the number of theses completed during 2008, approximately 240. We then estimated the number of theses/projects that would need to be completed each year if the same number of students who started in honors each year would conduct a thesis/project four years later. We allocated \$1500 for each thesis/project required above the baseline. These funds could be used by departments to support thesis work or to develop courses for students to engage in group projects.

We estimated overall curriculum costs based on three sources of funds: departmental contributions included in the baseline, contributions that honors had already been making to cover honors courses, and new funds needed to

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compensate departments for new curriculum. Additional funds requested, based on these estimates, began at \$432,000 in FY 2010 and grew to \$1.13 million in FY 2014.

We also made careful staffing plans. We operated on the premise that we would hire additional staff so that, as the program grew, we would maintain services at current levels or better. We created organizational charts for FY 2010 and FY 2011 with both current and new positions diagrammed, wrote job descriptions for all new positions, and strategized a staffing plan for the order of initiating new hires. We estimated that additional staffing costs would be an additional \$570,000 in 2008 dollars. We also included estimates in the budget for operations, programming, equipment, technology, and searches. Fully funding the proposed 2010 through 2014 budgets would constitute a QJ.

THE AFTERMATH

In early October of 2008, at the onset of the serious national, state, and university fiscal crisis, I presented this budget and business plan to the president, provost, and associate provost. They complimented me and my staff on the specificity, detail, and rationality of the plan and assured me that the honors program would receive the “funding it needed” to accomplish the expansion.

During the 2009 fiscal year, we received some permanent as well as temporary stop-gap funds to cover immediate curricular and other costs precipitated by the growth that had already occurred. No firm commitment was made to fund the full plan, however. While the university struggled to deal with the rescission, fears of future cuts, and other financial challenges, we waited to hear about the university’s commitment to our long-term plan.

Over the next few years, the honors program received additional funds in increments each year, some permanent, some temporary, but not nearly to the scale outlined in the honors expansion proposal. By 2011, we had a net gain of five positions compared with the nine we had requested. Funds used to compensate departments for additional honors classes rose from \$164,000 in 2007–08 to \$650,000 by 2011–12; this was a jump, but, according to our plan for FY 2013, that figure should have been almost double, \$1,223,000.

In the curricular arena, we accommodated to this lower level of support by not implementing the plan to compensate departments for thesis supervision, carefully monitoring course supply and demand, and setting realistic expectations among our students about the number of honors courses they should enroll in each semester. We leveraged our three student-affairs-oriented staff members by forging close relationships with the residential life office and building a strong cadre of honors student leaders and mentors.

NEU honors also benefited from its association with other units intended to support academic programs for ambitious students, subsumed under the rubric of enrichment programs. As associate vice provost for enrichment programs as well as honors director, I had been successful in garnering resources

for efforts like pre-medical and pre-law advising, individualized majors, and undergraduate research in conjunction with lobbying for support of expanded honors. Since honors students made disproportionate use of these offices anyway, the fact that enrichment programs' staff positions were added and more funds for research were obtained indirectly enabled us to better serve honors students.

CAN EXCELLENCE AND GROWTH COEXIST?

At the time of this writing, NEU's honors enrollment is officially at 1,749 compared with 1,254 when Mitchell arrived, and the academic preparedness of these larger cohorts of incoming students has been maintained at or above 2007 levels. These facts suggest that expanding NEU honors has had the impact hoped for by Hughes and Mitchell. Expanding the entering honors class did not result in the compromising of standards; rather, offering more spaces appears to have attracted even more ambitious and able students. We built it, and students came.

We also have strong evidence that the academic, social, and cultural experiences of honors students were not compromised as a result of growth. Data show that student engagement and satisfaction with NEU honors continues to increase despite its larger numbers. More students live in honors housing each year; rates of earning mid- and end-career honors awards are steady or increasing; and university retention rates for incoming honors students are extraordinarily high (Goodstein, Szarek and Wunschel). NEU honors in 2013 fosters a rich, varied, intellectually stimulating, and enjoyable environment for its students with a multitude of curricular and co-curricular choices. While I may be biased, I believe that the current NEU honors program reflects program excellence and has something of deep meaning to offer each of its students.

Our success in maintaining program excellence in the face of dramatic growth is partly attributable to additional budgetary resources. Comparing our current overall budget with what we had when President Mitchell first called for expanded honors, we are significantly ahead. The support never came close to what we had asked for, but we have learned to accommodate. Funds by themselves, however, would not have been sufficient to ensure program excellence in the face of growth. Careful planning and preparation of documents, reaching out to partners, maintaining strong communication about program goals, and keeping our eyes on what was most important—a quality experience for our students—have sustained us and kept us on course despite a few roadblocks that we encountered along the way.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

The NEU honors expansion story reflects many of the themes stressed by scholars and researchers who study change in higher education. I will close with a brief discussion of some of these themes.

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Change in higher education does not always go well. Students of university presidencies in particular have offered analyses of the challenges faced by presidents who bring activist agendas to a new position: sometimes they do not achieve their aims, and other times their presidencies are short-lived (Duderstadt). In the case of NEU, President Mitchell deserves credit for accomplishing his vision of growing the honors program while the middle managers, staff, and faculty deserve credit for their efforts to retain program quality. In this way, the case study may be considered an exemplary as opposed to a cautionary tale, but the narrative did not unfold seamlessly. At various stages, decisions that were made, actions that were taken, or situations that arose challenged the principals and impeded progress.

As others have argued (Duderstadt; Morrill), the inherent components of the role of university president may be at least partially responsible for these challenges. Unlike the gentleman-scholar presidents of times past, contemporary presidents are increasingly expected to be “transformational change agents” (Eckel and Kezar); yet coming into a new institution and being expected to “hit the ground running” with initiatives that will make a transformational difference can be a tall order. Scholars have noted the importance of tailoring new initiatives to the culture and individual character of an organization (Farmer; Martinez and Wolverton), but it is humanly impossible for presidents to develop an intimate knowledge of the workings of thousands of programs in a university within their first few months on the job. Therefore, it is logical that new presidents would rely on knowledge about programs in previous universities in conceptualizing their vision of change. Problems arise, however, when these ideas do not fit the culture of their new institution or when the new leaders move before they have garnered the trust and support of the people responsible for carrying out their ideas.

In his support of honors expansion, President Mitchell was driven by his ambition to raise NEU in the rankings by seeding the overall undergraduate population with a higher proportion of students in the honors program. During his early months at NEU, he did not have time to learn much about the current program and was influenced more by the vice president for enrollment management than by middle managers and faculty who would have been glad to educate him about NEU honors.

The abortive foray into “two-tier honors” is illustrative of another element of effective change-making: having a clear goal in mind for what one wishes to change and being prepared to sell that vision to stakeholders (Alfred). In one sense, President Mitchell did have a clear goal: more honors-caliber students recruited to NEU. But the president’s messages to his subordinates regarding the nature of expanded honors—its pedagogy, curriculum, and philosophy—were confusing and garbled. Those who worked below him struggled to discern what he wanted by listening to his comments about “what they did at Midwestern U.,” but, other than “growth,” his intentions were not at all clear.

For those responsible for delivering honors education, this ambiguity made us feel a bit like a dog that was following the wrong scent. Vice Provost Markle and I spent quite a bit of time researching and considering two-tier programs because President Mitchell appeared to support this model. In the end, the president supported a simple expansion of our current program. If the president had been clear about his preferences, we might have avoided the time-consuming and distracting focus on two-tier honors and used the time more constructively.

The ambiguity of President Mitchell's vision was compounded by his urgency about the timetable for expansion. As a "middle" (Buller), the vice provost was eager to accommodate her new boss but probably moved too quickly to create a plan that was ultimately jettisoned. Fortunately, the pace was slowed with the establishment in early 2008 of the committee that crystallized a realistic vision for how NEU could move forward while both adhering to the president's mandate and remaining true to our institutional culture and values.

Other aspects of the change process exemplified more desirable practices in making institutional change. One thing we did right was creating a financial model. According to Morrill, "Those who study collegiate strategic planning . . . soon come to a surprising realization. Many plans do not include either a financial model to test the cost of the initiatives being proposed or a method to fund them" (210). Creating the NEU honors business plan and budget was a painstaking process, but it was invaluable in ensuring success going forward. By specifying what our program would look like each year during the growth period, we were then able to tackle the question of what the expansion would cost. Not every assumption we used turned out to be accurate, but the planning exercise provided us with a much clearer sense of how we would proceed and what resources we would need. Having the business plan also helped immeasurably when the budget crisis hit. Given the unlikelihood that we would receive all of the funds we requested, having a plan with dollar amounts attached to each segment helped us to think creatively about how to sustain our commitment to excellence in the face of fewer resources.

This point relates to another strong argument made by students of institutional change: successful implementation of a plan for change requires collaboration with and buy-in from stakeholders and a sense that the change envisioned is "infused throughout the organization" (Paris). Involving partners such as faculty, admissions, and student affairs in the planning process and really listening to them when they expressed objections to, for instance, the two-tier model helped us later as we began to see our numbers rise. Because of these strong partnerships, we were in a good position to leverage resources with other units to address parts of our plan that we could not adequately fund ourselves.

Finally, the NEU story underscores how important it is for leaders to keep their focus on mission, quality, and excellence (Morrill). We faced a dilemma when we first heard about President Mitchell's idea for expanded honors, but, throughout the process, honors staff and faculty kept their focus on the mission of NEU honors and on developing specific plans to ensure excellence in the face of growth.

PROGRAM EXCELLENCE VERSUS PROGRAM GROWTH

In the case of NEU, I would argue that the past ten years have witnessed a gradual and palpable advancement of the quality of honors education despite the fact that the program is now twice the size and has received significantly fewer resources than we requested (Goodstein, Szarek, and Wunschel). From our many strategic planning efforts, we have clarity of vision, good will among our faculty and staff partners, and the pleasure of working with wonderful students. This combination of careful planning, clear vision, good will, reasonable support from above, and a lot of hard work demonstrate that growth in honors and quality improvement can go hand in hand.

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