

Your Turn

by Len Jessup

Up to the Challenge: Views from a New Dean

Two years ago, when I was 41 years old, I became the new dean of the College of Business and Economics at Washington State University. For two years before, I had spearheaded the CBE's information systems program, so I thought I knew the college more than well enough to step seamlessly into the dean's position. I was unaware of what was ahead of me.

I had no break-in period, no calm before the storm. In my very first week on the job, I had to implement an externally imposed budget cut that involved job eliminations. In addition, a mountain of AACSB reaccreditation materials covered my desk, for I had taken the job during the third year of a continuing review of the CBE. As our review team leader put it when he described the situation to our faculty, the school was "at the plate in the bottom of the ninth inning with two outs and a full count."

As I dug into the review team's assessment of our school, I was surprised at what I found. The assessment's neatly detailed report outlined 16 major "must-fix" items. These included fundamental issues such as the rigor of our promotion, tenure, and review processes; the need to cut programs; the need to assess learning outcomes; and the need to define academic qualifications, among others. We were a good college, the assessment found, but we had been ravaged by budget cuts over the last two decades. We were trying to do far too much with too few resources. We weren't enforcing some key rules

and standards. We weren't as merit-based as we should have been. Morale was low, and our staff and faculty desperately needed to be energized, praised, trusted, focused, and enabled. Furthermore, our faculty had no idea of the performance, rewards, or resource allocations of each unit; misperceptions and mistrust were rampant throughout the college. Finally, the report said, we lacked clear vision. We needed complete re-engineering and transformation, which included making significant changes to our culture.



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That's the moment I wondered what I had gotten myself into. The audit was painful, embarrassing, and discouraging. I now can admit openly that in that first week on the job, I thought the task before us could be insurmountable, especially given that we had only a year left on our continuing review clock. It was June; the review team was scheduled to visit again in August. I felt an urgency to do something bold and dramatic—and fast.

Luckily, I found I wasn't in this alone. A broad coalition of faculty and administrators offered their services. The president and provost of the university really wanted to have a strong, accredited business program, and they supported our efforts. A number of influential alumni recognized the need for change. Soon, I began to see this daunting challenge as a "good-to-great" opportunity and a useful blueprint of our future transformation. I started to believe that we really could get this job done.

I knew I needed some administrative backup, something usually provided by associate deans. I had a very good sitting associate dean of undergraduate programs, but I had no associate dean of faculty affairs. The lack of that position was a symptom and cause of many of the problems outlined in that 16-point analysis. I filled that post in short order with a talented faculty member from our marketing department.

Then, with just weeks left before the review team's visit, my associate deans and I determined which faculty members were available that summer to help. We formed a cross-college reaccreditation task force and wrote a detailed action plan addressing each of the 16 points, explaining what we would do to solve each problem and in what time frame. The plan required us to take several drastic measures:

- Enforce strict standards of academic and professional qualifications for faculty.

- Rewrite the college's promotion and tenure document and re-engineer both processes.

- Redesign the annual performance appraisal process to be completely merit-based.

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- Provide more and better feedback to faculty, chairs, and units in annual reviews.

- Cut the number of our academic offerings by about half to allow us to focus our efforts on our strengths.

- Redesign our undergraduate core business curriculum to be focused on outcomes, and plan similar changes to our MBA program.

- Erase a budget deficit and secure growth in our budget from central administration.

- Plow available resources into our development team.

In addition, our plan aligned with WSU's four core strategic goals: offer the best undergraduate experience in a research university; nurture a world-class environment for research, scholarship, graduate education, and the arts; create an environment of trust and respect; and develop a culture of shared commitment to quality.

One week before the review team's visit, we called an all-college briefing where we presented an action plan to our faculty and staff. A few faculty members were angered that we had created the plan over the summer without their direct participation. Many were shocked by the severity of the problems—not to mention the scope of the solutions.

When the review team came the following week, we arranged another all-college briefing. There the team leader waved our action plan above his head, gave his "bottom-of-the-ninth-inning" analogy, and told us that if we followed this plan we just might make it. That moment galvanized the faculty and prepared them for the coming changes. In many ways, our reaccreditation bid, and the college's trajectory, changed for the

better that day. We had angered some faculty, but in taking this difficult step we had turned a corner. Now we had to follow through on our plan.

Fast forward to early 2004. With the possible reaffirmation of our accreditation just two months away, we had completed more than 90 percent of our action plan. We had succeeded in a near-total re-engineering of our College of Business and Economics. We were breaking records for fund raising. We had redesigned our undergraduate curriculum and had a redesign of our MBA program in the works. Something dynamic was happening in our college. By April 2004, our reaffirmation of accreditation was formally announced at AACSB International's Annual Meeting in Montreal. We had done it.

As a new dean, I had accepted this challenge and worked with the entire community of the college, university, and other constituents to accomplish it. We know we're not done yet in our "good-to-great" transformation, but we're well on our way. For example, our international business and entrepreneurship programs have risen in the rankings, and we are now leading a campuswide Entrepreneurship and Innovation Initiative. We're taking the vision that carried us through the reaccreditation process and incorporating it into our formal strategic plan: "To be one of the

best and most innovative programs in the world by the end of the decade."

I certainly don't recommend that a college—or a dean—rely on reaccreditation as dramatically as we did to effect transformation. But the experience has been a significant opportunity for me. I have learned that surrounding myself with competent, committed people at work is one of the best decisions I could have made as a dean.

I also learned that achieving a balance between the rewards and challenges of home and career is imperative for any dean. To make it through these last two years, I had to rely on my family. Even though my wife was working to achieve tenure at another college on campus, she took on more responsibilities at home and made sure I was as engaged in the family when I was at home as I was in my job when I was at work. At the time, our daughter was a charming four-year-old and our new baby boy was growing more delightful every day; my wife didn't want me to miss a thing. As a result, despite long hours at work and time away on work-related travel, I still feel connected to her and our children, now six and two.

If I had the opportunity to do it all over again, I'd do it in a second. This experience has given me two of the most fun and rewarding years of my life. To continue our review team leader's baseball analogy, I truly feel as if we've hit a grand slam to win the game. More important, I feel ready and eager to serve as coach for many games to come. **■**

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