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To Have and to Hold: Reflections of an Interim Director

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Abstract

Leading a long-established LLC as an Interim Director poses particular challenges and rewards. Uncertainties abound for the program and for the individual. Professionally speaking, taking on the hybrid role of faculty/administrator can be both difficult and exciting. Ultimately, the solutions are in the details. Listening carefully to students, understanding institutional history, and looking toward the demands of the future can help an Interim Director care-take the program. In this reflection on my experience with the Russell Scholars Program at the University of Southern Maine, I seek to show how a commitment to student engagement is the bedrock for a successful interim period. From holding to stewarding to shaping, an Interim Director can support and buoy an established program. From a background in literature and creative writing, I discovered the poetry of work in the complexity of this new role. Rather than threaten to destabilize a settled environment, an interim period can provide a necessary pause for reflection and appreciation. As with other interstices, the period between permanent directorships can be rich with new energy, new ways of seeing, and new appreciation for the philosophical undergirding of the original LLC.

Keywords

Interim Director, Living Learning Community, Russell Scholars Program

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The Poetics of Change

Stewarding a long-standing program through an interim period carries special challenges and rewards. Until a permanent director is in place, significant changes to curriculum and policies are not warranted. Yet continuing to run a Living Learning Community in all aspects *status quo* can sanction stasis. What's really needed is a practical application of some familiar contractual language. "To have and to hold," in this case, means that the Interim Director commits to learning as much as possible about the program, in order to "hold it" securely while infusing it with new energy such that it can adapt to changing needs when they come. Taking on a too passive or too active role can threaten the stability of the community. The Interim Director should seek instead a poised balance by understanding the LLC as a microcosm of the larger university—as its own world—through the voices of the students.

Achieving poise and balance, especially in a new role, is not easy. But it can be assisted at various levels. The university itself must support the LLC's continued relevance as a mechanism for welcoming and nurturing incoming students through their first experiences with college-level expectations and environments. Immediate supervisors can guide the Interim Director toward training resources and serve as liaisons to many vital departmental contacts. Co-administrators with experience and open minds are invaluable. Faculty dedicated to active teaching and to mentoring students beyond the classroom, as the second-year retention rate reflects the first-year experience, should be sought and retained.

Finally, the Interim Director herself must be ready for the challenge of living in—and leading—this world. It may be a different microcosm than a home department, given the aims of team-teaching, interdisciplinarity, and residential programming. It may be a matter of bridging the gap from a known academic field to a new administrative field. Coming to the role of Interim Director after many years focused on teaching, I have faced a learning curve. To a person comfortable with accentual verse, onomatopoeia, lineation . . . who believes in the associational value of thinking through poetry toward larger metaphors potentially containing more-than-human truths, the new landscape is foreign. Strategic Procurement. Maine Street Marketplace. Infosilem. Are these methods of attack? Bargain basements? Silos of information to scale or share? In the world of administrivia—a term I admire for its economy—where can a poetry lover find solace? In an interval of undefined length and of uncertain effects, what is her role in leading the learning community? Is she a shepherd? Goal tender? Sage? Supplicant?

I jest. But the challenge of locating the poetry in administrative matters is serious. When tightening budgets system-wide require one person to do work formerly associated with other roles, finding the poetry in one's work—even in the interim—seems critical to sustaining professional engagement and thus sustaining the program. At the conclusion of a first interim year, I have learned that poetry might not be irrelevant to the practical matters of supporting an academic environment. Navigating the terrain, after all, is a first step toward knowing the terrain. To know, in this case, is to understand a philosophy of good intent. At the University of Southern Maine, the poetics of academia led to something great, something that I am tasked with preserving.

Octave—the history of Russell Scholars

Twenty-two years ago, the nascent learning community at USM began as a reform movement: invite those students interested in community participation into the home-away-from-home of the Russell Scholars Program. Prioritize the building of community alongside academic study. Center the social dimensions of peer collaboration so important to learning within the curriculum, in a one-credit lab course acquainting students with campus resources as they develop peer relationships. Schedule special events on and off campus where they can deepen those bonds—a ropes course, a catered picnic, a movie screening. Give them an opportunity to leave the country and gain perspective through study abroad.

Named after an early trustee who might have bequeathed funding but didn't, the program nonetheless flourished. The Scholars distinguished themselves from the Honors students by the bell curve of their preparation and abilities. Not limited by high GPAs, they united to create a purposeful microcosm on the campus. All majors, all backgrounds, all choosing to start college as part of an academic cohort devoted to community building. Self-selecting and inclusive, the program attracted out-going personalities and quieter types. Successful in retention early on, it gained favor with the administration.

At the University of Southern Maine, this first living-learning community had big plans. Lodge the students in a cinderblock dormitory with a fireplace in the main lobby, secure funding to attract faculty, take students to London in winter, to Boston in spring. Build in service learning as a voluntary and a for-credit opportunity, commission a hardcover scrapbook from the most dedicated participants. Welcome alumni back into the fold to talk about how their experiences with collaboration and interdisciplinary course work sparked a desire for lifelong learning no matter their given profession. Structure the curriculum most densely in the first year, but allow for tiered “labs” that continue the social bonds and allow for informal peer mentoring. The older students will linger because of those powerful early attachments; the younger students will absorb the ineffable “magic” and, despite being a group of largely first-generation college students, they will stick to their educational path, stay enrolled at the university, and strike out into individual majors with strength and hope. Spread their wings.

This is a kind of poetry—the nineteen year-old from “the county” (Aroostook), who starts to feel a resonance between the annual potato harvest and the history of agriculture, or the eighteen year-old from the mill town, who gleans the ethics of business and botanicals manufacturing. What more could an interim director do than hold all this in her lap, grateful for the bounty?

Volta—turning toward the future

I inherited a two decades-old, successful, beloved learning community that I now describe to friends and colleagues as an engine that has quietly, doggedly, reliably, hummed along like the heavy Chevy in the driveway. In our wintry Maine landscape, this engine meets the eye with solid reassurance. It can plow the snow, it can retrieve the kids from the late practice, it can carry a custom-built screen door from shop to site, no problem. The seats are capable, if dusty; the windows operable by hand. The miles stack up with sheer numerical virtue.

Solace may be found in the very familiarity of such metaphors, in such dusty, sturdy seats. But just as modern plows are split in the middle, to help you stay on the road, my job is to configure our energies to help our LLC stay current. We'll need that built-in GPS, the hands-free messaging. We'll need to breathe life into this engine to keep it turning over with a measurable, illuminating spark. In the particular case of the Russell Scholars Program (solid admits, high retention rates, committed faculty), the humming engine must be treated with respect and appreciation even as we

shift into the future. And so, after several months of caretaking, it's time to read "to steward" as a more active verb.

Sestet—new season, new growth

Welcome to the spring semester. No matter that spring weather is still far away. What matters is that we have an action plan, and we have permission from above to "shape" this steadfast learning community. Following a great deal of information gathering—from a loquacious focus group, SurveyMonkeys, Doodle polls, course and program evaluations, office hours and conferences with students—we have some ideas.

The best ideas begin with the students. Engaging a work-study student, a first-year, in the office for a few hours a week, has been one of the most effective initiatives. I can say "initiative" because, although we didn't know it at the time, the presence of this student in the office has increased office visits from other students tenfold. Beyond assisting with clerical duties, this student has created video from program events, added photographs of our students to our website, interviewed graduating seniors in our Capstone course, and made possible a more lively and engaged atmosphere than we could manage ourselves. In return, we offer her several faculty mentors, experience with marketing, communications, and the less tangible, less resume-tailored profits of building her community from within.

Failure, too, has served us well. A grant proposal that didn't make, in the fall semester, has turned into a pilot project for the next fall semester, despite lack of outside funding. We will still cultivate a group of four to six sophomores who will serve as peer mentors to the incoming students, ultimately creating our first-ever program newsletter and editing it themselves—a combination of federal work-study hours and one-credit lab course registration will solve the funding question. We'll add a new core curriculum course in the fall that I will teach, and we'll cross-list a course with another department for spring. Our "menu" for the sophomores includes also the chance to be a TA for the large entry-year experience course required of all first-year students and team taught in our program. TAs will convene study groups, evaluate informal journal writing assignments, and present their own final projects when the end of the term draws near. Compensation will be handled similarly, through a combination of work-study funds and course credit, to ensure students do their jobs and that we do ours by them. Although I still wish we could pay students from our budget, we are anything but impoverished.

The interim period has been rich, and I've been richly rewarded: with augmented insight into the workings of the program, with a supervisor who enters into long conversations about concepts as readily as she meets the nuts and bolts; with an associate director whose insight and compassion for the students always carries the day; with faculty colleagues who teach with me and will still talk about poetry when we are too overscheduled to talk about anything else. Most importantly, the students are still here, working their own magic, doing what they do in and out of the classroom as they find themselves, find one another, and find greater meaning in their world. I'm looking forward to a second year of serving as an Interim Director who can begin to make some adjustments for the health of the LLC. Turns out our comfortable, familiar home will be moved across the quad to a renovated space with cleaner bathrooms, carpeted floors, and proximity to the health center. Always good to have an "in" with the school nurse.

While I have feared that the magic of Russell Scholars was inherent in the original physical building it has occupied for these two decades, I am learning that it is portable, like so much else in our global world. We will move our village. As Interim Director, I will help. We'll tend this change, and then we'll tend to the other things that need attention. Integrating technology with

course work. Re-mapping the curriculum to cover more core requirements. Strengthening bonds with the study abroad office. Creating a second-year peer mentor group with clear responsibilities. Holding an open house to show off our new space. Inviting the President. (The University one.)

Coda

From having and holding to stewarding and shaping: the interim director role evolves as the University's needs evolve. I see now that the challenge is to preserve the strengths of this Living Learning Community in time, as time moves forward. I predict: Russell Scholars will thrive in a new era. Build it, and they will come. Thus the navigation has been essential, and the students have been expert interpreters for me. I still look forward to the reading and annotating work of class prep and the dialogue between and with students as the primary motivator of my professional energies. But directing is connecting with the students we care for. It's an integral commitment, not separate from teaching. Not antithetical to poetry. The administrative muscle gets refined with practice, and I have gained some vocabulary.

Interim year opens out
into another year of inter-opportunity.

We gather, gaining identity.
The dialogue tells us where to turn, when.

A stanza for the students, a nod to the faculty, Kaltura for the new classrooms.
We have changed our lives. "2.0" is code and coda and new chapter to come.