



---

# Small is Beautiful

Small Programs in a Big Program World

---

Norene James, BA, MLIS  
Curriculum Coordinator  
Library and Information Technology Program  
MacEwan University, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

*“Like most small things, small ... programs don’t get much notice” (Foster, 1986, p. 43).*

It is understandable when faculty and administrators of a small program feel like a poor cousin in an institution that seems focused on developing large programs. The publicity, the money, even the mission statement of the University<sup>1</sup> can seem unforgivingly biased towards larger, cutting edge departments. Leaders, whether justified or not, may feel constantly on edge believing they will be forgotten in favor of bigger programs.

However, there are advantages to being small. Such programs can be nimble, and adjust more quickly to change than larger programs. A small program can have greater adaptability and therefore sustainability in an institution. There are many opportunities if we learn how to capitalize on this and other strengths inherent in smallness.

### **WHAT QUALIFIES AS A ‘SMALL’ PROGRAM?**

In a colloquial sense, a small program is small if you think it is. We usually know who we are. But there are more concrete ways to define a small program within an academic institution. A Masters of Public Administration program survey defined a small program as (1) the small number of full-time faculty members, (2) the small number of students, (3) the level or amount of program resources and (4) the “breadth of the curriculum” (McGinnis, 1993, p. 22). Level and breadth of the program refer to a program with a steady cohort of students who are taking a prescribed program of study with few options or variation in curriculum. It is a discrete program in a fairly distinctive and tightly defined discipline.

There are, of course, impediments and vulnerabilities for any academic program regardless of size, depending on industry trends and institutional vision. However, there are additional challenges to a smaller program that we should be aware of.

1. There is limited interaction with other professional colleagues in the same discipline because there may only be one faculty member in a small program. There isn’t anyone else in the department to exchange ideas with, or talk discipline-specific philosophy.
2. There are multiple tasks for one person (you may be the ‘chief cook and bottle washer’) leaving little time for interaction with industry professionals or professional development.
3. Teaching loads can be heavy in smaller programs, which often have one or two faculty members responsible for a majority of the subject-specific coursework. This leaves little time for program development and reflection.
4. An attitude of provincialism can develop because of the inability to focus on reflective tasks or setting future goals. We rely on how we have always done

---

<sup>1</sup> The term “University” is used throughout this paper and is meant to represent any post-secondary institution.

things and neglect to focus on the bigger picture. We might be afraid to try anything new or forget how to think progressively.

5. Small programs are in greater danger of being cut entirely. While a large program may see a specific area suffer the effects of a budget cut, a small program may be more vulnerable to a complete severance. Our sustainability can feel threatened.

## **LEADING FROM THE MIDDLE**

Another major challenge (not necessarily unique to us but perhaps more difficult for small programs) is balancing the worlds around you. We occupy the middle space between our students and senior academic administrators. However, unlike larger programs, we are sometimes forgotten or we struggle to make our work receive due recognition. Our Deans may have bigger fish to fry. At the same time our students see our small programs as their entire world. We, as administrators of small programs, therefore work in an environment of contrasting goals, aspirations, and priorities.

In order to fully capitalize on the advantages inherent in a small program, you need to effectively lead from *where you are*. How positioned are you in your institution to capitalize on your strengths?

### **Managing versus Leading**

The small program leader must recognize the difference between managing and leading. Managing is taking care of the day-to-day. There is no question this is critical to the job, but more importantly, “leadership involves activities that effect change” (Stone, 2011, p. 3). Because of the challenges mentioned, you may find you spend time managing instead of leading. You must be deliberate in considering ways to *advance* the program (focusing on leading), and not just sustain it (focusing on managing).

### **Understand how your superior leads**

Spend time building coalitions, creating efficiencies, and learn to recognize what environment constraints there are in effecting change. This begins with clearly understanding how your superiors lead. The authors of *Leading from the Middle*, offer these questions: Is your superior a leader or a manager? How do they communicate? What stage are they in their leadership role? Deans (or other superiors) “go through very specific stages as they adjust to the positions” (Stone, 2011, p. 4). Are they relatively new to their role, so more focused on the institutional goals and dynamics? If they have been in the role for a while, they may be refining their focus and getting to know the programs and individuals within it. Or, they may be confident enough in their knowledge and vision to make suggestions specific to your discipline. Other questions arise from this: Is your superior a knowledgeable member of your profession, or an ‘outsider’? How does he/she envision working with the program – at arm’s length or in direct, frequent contact? How detailed does your accountability have to be to your superior?

Once you recognize the level of support and the style of leadership of your superior, you can adjust your expectations and your approach to how you will advocate for your program. For example, my own Library & Information Technology program (a cohort of

80 students, one full-time faculty member and several sessional instructors) developed a business proposal last year to hire a full-time laboratory instructor. The proposal was targeted towards senior administration that had minimal knowledge of the discipline or curriculum. I avoided acronyms, provided more substantial explanations of the importance of the lab, and spoke in general business terms that I knew leaders in the School of Business would understand.<sup>2</sup>

### **Know your world**

Have a comprehensive understanding of how to communicate with the worlds in which you operate – both internal and external. The internal world includes those you are in direct contact with daily (faculty, staff, and students). The external world is senior administration, alumni, industry leaders, professional associations, accrediting bodies, to name a few. Who are the members of your external world? The ways in which you communicate with these worlds will be different and each will pose unique challenges and often will come in conflict. This is the first step in developing appropriate and successful strategies to get everyone committed to the same goals that you have. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to *introduce* the internal and external worlds. For example, host mixers (business-related social events) that bring together people from industry and those in administration. Or, sponsor a professional association event and make sure the event is recorded in the Faculty's news bulletin. You could even invite your senior administration to attend one of your classes.

For a small program, leading from the middle can be extremely effective if it's done right. The potential for growth in success and reputation is high because you can influence stakeholders more directly. You need to develop your strength as a “translator, who puts each side's message in a form the other can understand, a mediator who represents each side to the other, and a magician who conjures rabbits from seemingly empty hats” (Bolman, 2011, p. 160).

### **HOW TO REALLY CAPITALIZE ON YOUR STRENGTHS**

We may have a firm grasp on how our superiors lead, have a positive relationship with stakeholders, a good reputation in the institution, and are fairly secure in our value as an academic unit. What is next? How can we truly effect change and success for our program?

There are common factors that contribute to a program's success, large or small. According to Robert Singer in the Department of Exercise and Sports Sciences at the University of Florida, any program's success - large or small - can be attributed to:

1. Attaining and maintaining academic and scientific acceptance and responsibility
2. Determining viable occupational alternatives for students
3. Developing a reputation for caring about students

---

<sup>2</sup> Incidentally, the proposal was approved but only in part; a contract position was established and we were able to at least begin to achieve our goals we had in mind.

4. Attracting outstanding students and helping them locate jobs upon graduation
5. Obtaining public awareness and support
6. Generating effective public relations (Singer, 1998, p. 153)

Keeping these measures of success in mind, we can look to more specific strategies for small programs. David Foster in “Training Writing Teachers in a Small Program” suggests three values that are inherent: “freedom, individuality, and collegiality” (Foster, 1986, p. 44). Interestingly, one could apply these values in the small business world. The similarities are striking. Christine Churchill, President of KeyRelevance.com, a business that helps small businesses achieve success in their online presence, wrote of three key strategies for a small business to succeed: think niche, think local, and think creatively (Churchill, 2007). If you take these concepts and relate them to David Foster’s, you can see that we can apply much of the same strategies that a small business owner would to ensure success and growth.

### **1. INDIVIDUALITY (*think niche*)**

What makes you special? If you don’t know the answer, you certainly can’t expect anyone else to. You need to sell the ‘niche’ aspect of your program. Niche does not have to be a negative word. In the business world, it means you offer a service to a “specialized segment of a larger market” (Churchill, 2007). Build a sense of individuality and embrace the uniqueness of your program. Do not try to be a carbon copy of another, larger program. Do not be afraid to stand out.

Use your biggest allies – your students - to advertise your ‘niche’ and strengthen the program’s optics within the institution, as well as externally. A small program can offer opportunities for the students to assume larger roles in the program and ultimately strengthen the students’ experience and employability. Because faculty is often more accessible than in a large program, the opportunity exists for a closer relationship between faculty and the student – a better chance for the faculty member to get to know each student. It not only will strengthen the student’s commitment to the program (and ultimately their success), but can also increase your program’s reputation throughout the University. Some ideas are to:

- Have an active recruitment program; advertise externally and be vocal in requesting the best public relations the institution can offer you in the way of brochures, open houses, information nights, posters, advertisements, and even commercials. Be emphatic that your program being included in external marketing campaigns.
- Create a student club. Offer a benefit to belonging, and use it to showcase the program at a broader level, in university events, and with other student services.
- Have a formalized orientation program and have all faculty members and staff (including your superiors) welcome every student. Create a sense of ownership in the student to the program and early on, a loyalty to the program and the profession. Remember that students and alumni are your biggest advocates and have the potential to be a loud voice of support.

- Create a sense of identity for the program through a logo, t-shirt, or other very simple marketing ideas. This will help you to be more visible in the University but also in industry. It does not have to cost a lot of money to be effective.
- Use your student's unique talents for the greater good. What are they learning that could benefit someone in the University? The Library students, to develop experience with children's programming, host a puppet show for the daycare students in the University. Occasionally, a local grade school class comes to watch. It's a great way to connect with both external and internal stakeholders, the students benefit by gaining experience performing before a live audience, and it's a skill that no one else in the University has to offer.

In addition, consider ways in which your individuality, specialized knowledge and talents can contribute to University life. Use those attributes on university-wide committees, to collaborate with other faculty members, and in faculty development opportunities. Think about the positive effects your involvement will have on the program, not just a 'duty' you are required to do.

## **2. COLLEGIALITY (*think local*)**

Closely tied to the idea of individuality is collegiality. Your local, or collegial, market is your student body, your immediate colleagues, your institution, and the local industry. Focus your efforts on generating strong relationships with these groups. You will gain allies in many unexpected areas, and that can ensure your program's success.

### **Building collegiality within your faculty**

There can be a more intimate relationship among the teaching faculty of the program. As an example, meetings of large programs are often inefficient or sectioned into smaller groups. In a small program however, everyone can come together at one time, in one place, which allows for meaningful discussions and sharing of pedagogy and current professional topics. There is "an authenticity from the mutual interest of all participants" (Foster, 1986, p. 45)

You want all your instructors to feel a strong connection and investment in the outcome and success in the program. The closer their connection to course leaders and administration, the greater their autonomy in planning curriculum, and the more direct role they play in the program's overall vision, the deeper will be their commitment and investment in the program's success.

David Foster suggests ways to create an attitude of commitment in sessional faculty:

1. Allow sessional instructors as much freedom as possible in syllabi development

2. Have regular meetings with sessional faculty, full-time faculty and administrators, with the emphasis on pedagogical discussions and sharing of industry developments, not policy and routine procedural tasks.
3. Organize a strong mentorship program
4. Include sessional faculty in academic events such as department meetings, school-wide social events, and include them in the celebration of student successes such as the graduation ceremony. As David Foster writes, the point isn't whether or not they participate, it is the effort you made to include them in this greater community of education (Foster, 1986, p. 47-48).

### **Building collegiality in your institution**

It is also critical that the small program have a strong presence in the institution as a whole – your external collegiality if you will. The program mission statement should be aligned with that of the institution. 'Naval gazing' will create isolation from knowing the broader direction of the parent company. The small program should be as visible and as well known as possible. Singer states, "as we become a presence, we provide necessary services while facilitating an understanding of our department: a small investment for long-term gains" (Singer, 1998, p. 156).

### **Building collegiality in industry**

Local connections, value, and sentiment can build the strength of a small program. Reputations are usually built at a local level, where your students are getting jobs. Focus on strengthening your local connections, invest your time heavily cultivating authentic relationships, and you will see quality results as your reputation becomes known. Industry is a powerful ally when it comes to larger challenges you face within the academic institution.

## **3. FREEDOM (*think creatively*)**

Smaller programs can have more freedom to make changes because they are more fluid and require less consultation than a larger program. You can respond quickly to changes you need to make in order to stay current in industry, and are only restricted by the protocol that exists in the institution for managing that change. Capitalize on this ability to be creative and responsive, and do not become a program so rooted in tradition, that you lose your ability to embrace creative ideas.

Think creatively as well about how to build unlikely allies. Think of who you can connect with both inside and outside of the college environment. There are many opportunities that are easy to accomplish:

- Produce outreach programs and offer services to members both in the profession and outside of it. Is there an area of specialty you offer that might benefit others? You can also offer courses from your program that would be of value to other programs within the institution.
- Keep curriculum fresh and fluid, instituting change as quickly as possible. Capitalize on the fact that you are small, can make curriculum decisions fairly independently, so don't be afraid to actually institute those ideas!
- Create an active alumni association and keep close, personal contact with graduates. Be an active supporter of their professional success. Not many programs will have the time or ability to do this- certainly not large programs. This gives you a huge advantage in building allies and will help you in staying current in industry. Just the other day, a former student visited me in my office and talked at length about her current school library job. I gleaned invaluable knowledge about the current state of school libraries from our discussion. Without having established a solid relationship of trust and friendship, she would never have spent the time visiting and sharing.
- Encourage your faculty to become involved in the greater industry and be as visible as possible through publications, conference participation, or even just sponsoring and supporting local professional events. Give everyone around you the opportunity to think creatively in ways to keep your program fresh.

## FINAL COMMENTS

We need to shift our energy from *surviving* to *thriving*. When we are in survival mode, we can become defensive and act in isolation. We emulate negativity whether we realize it or not. Our strategy becomes just surviving another day.

Imagine the difference if our confidence level is high and we have a firm grasp of who we are and what we do. Confidence can “allow us to take charge, play to our strong suits and become indispensable to our institutions” (Scanlan, 1998, p. 130).

You **can** affect the future of your small program but it begins with the confidence to do so. You must unapologetically capitalize on your freedom, individuality, and collegiality and be deliberately strategic in your actions. You need to be an effective leader from where you are in the institution. Start to develop a very clear and unbiased understanding of the world in which you operate, and learn how to present yourself as a collegial, yet innovative leader who is willing to contribute to a greater cause.

## References

Bolman, L. G., & Gallos, J. V. (2011). Leading from the middle. In *Reframing academic leadership [electronic resource]* (1st ed., pp. 143-162). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Retrieved from Grant MacEwan University Access



- Churchill, C. (2007). Survival of the nimble. Message posted to <http://searchengineland.com/survival-of-the-nimble-10695>
- DeYoung, J. L. (1985). So you're it! The theatre program of limited size. *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin*, 54, 67-68.
- Foster, D. (1986). Training writing teachers in a small program. *WPA. Writing Program Administration*, 10(1-2), 43-49.
- McGinnis, H. K. (1993). The status of small MPA programs: A commitment to quality, diversity, and uniqueness. *International Journal of Public Administration*, 16(1), 15-33.  
doi:dx.doi.org/10.1080/01900699308524788
- Scanlan, T. K. (1998). Thriving versus surviving. *Quest*, 50(2), 126-133.
- Singer, R. N. (1998). Traditionally strong academic programs: Gaining identity and respect for a department. *Quest*, 50(2), 149-158.
- Stone, T., Coussons-Read, M. E., & American Council on Education. (2011). *Leading from the middle [electronic resource] : A case-study approach to academic leadership for associate deans*. Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers. Retrieved from Grant MacEwan University Access
- Swanson, M. M. (1986). Confronting the problem of retention in the theatre program of limited size. *Association for Communication Administration Bulletin*, (58), 66-67.
- Wilmore, J. H. (1998). Building strong academic programs for our future. *Quest*, 50(2), 103-107.