THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY: USING EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING IN THE CLASSROOM

WHARTON, ROBERT AND PARRY, LINDA E.
WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY
ROBERT.WHARTON@WKU.EDU; LINDA.PARRY@WKU.EDU

ABSTRACT

Academic experiences designed to promote active learning can be thrilling and memorable educational opportunities for students and their instructors. Unfortunately, they can also be miserable failures for students lacking necessary skills and motivation, and for instructors lacking necessary resources and support. This paper describes two active learning projects, both successful in many ways, and draws from them observations and lessons on the failings of active education for some students, and the burdens placed on instructors.

Experiential learning is not a new concept. Originally derived from apprenticeship programs, experiential learning strives to give students the opportunity to put into practice the theories they learn in the classroom. Proponents are quick to point out that active learning goes beyond memorization and requires students to become engaged in the process. This leads to deeper understanding and longer retention. Moreover, research indicates that student satisfaction is greater when the classroom environment encourages student involvement.

Business schools have particularly embraced experiential learning. The new American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) curriculum guidelines (1993) stress the importance of providing students with the necessary competencies or skills to be successful businesspeople. As a result, experiential or "hands-on" activities have become an integral part of undergraduate education. Many instructors work extensively to incorporate as many active learning experiences as possible into their classes. Employers use them as criteria for selecting graduates. Universities use them as a recruitment tool. For the most part, experiential learning has provided many positive outcomes for students and faculty. Nevertheless, there are drawbacks to active learning that rarely are discussed in academic forums.

For two semesters in 2000, we supervised two active learning projects. One project brought twelve seniors together to compete in the 37th Annual International Collegiate Business Policy Competition (ICBPC). Substituting for the capstone strategic management class, students competed against other students from universities across the country. For a semester, students created and operated a virtual company in a highly aggressive environment

The second project was an entrepreneurship class that brought together business students to actually create, manage and market a music CD over two semesters. The student company, Starving Students Production (SSP), produced and sold a rock CD, "Code Red: Destination Unknown."

Both projects were very successful. Students in the policy competition won first place. The entrepreneurship project won the Southern Business Award for Innovation in Teaching. Nevertheless, both successes came at a very high cost. In this paper, we will look at both the good, bad, and ugly sides of experiential learning and discuss strategies for increasing success.

THE INTERNATIONAL COLLEGIATE BUSINESS POLICY COMPETITION

Computerized business simulations are experience-compression exercises. The instructor puts students into small teams, each representing top company management. Every company is in the same industry and each company sells a product. Initially, each team inherits a company with identical characteristics. Team members then proceed to make all the strategic, marketing, production, financial, and managerial decisions

for their firm. The administrator processes their decisions. The simulation program compares decisions submitted from every team and determines how each company performed in the industry based on the direction and the quality of the decisions. Students get quick feedback as they can typically pick up the results within an hour of submission. They then make decisions for the next period. Each decision typically represents either a quarter or a year in the life of the company. Computer simulations generally last throughout a ten to fifteen week period.

According to Faria (1987) computer simulation use across the functional areas of a business school education is fairly widespread. His study showed that almost two thousand four-year colleges and universities used simulation games, whereas 95% of the AACSB schools used simulations in some aspect of the curriculum. In an updated study, Faria (1998) reported that simulation use had increased to 97.5% of AACSB schools. Faculty report that simulations provides students with a scenario for more realistic decision-making, creates a sense of urgency for the students as they compete with classmates, and provides quick and objective feedback. In addition, researchers have found a direct relationship between the use of simulations and student satisfaction (Walter, Coalter, and Rasheed, 1997). Learning via simulations builds up student's confidence in analyzing revenue-cost-profit economics of a business, helps them understand how functional pieces fit together, and develops the powers of managerial judgment.

We have been using computer simulations in our strategic management courses for over ten years and we had been very interested in the International Collegiate Business Policy Competition (ICBPC). Unlike most simulations in which competition takes place among teams in the same university, the ICBPC enables student teams from all over the globe to compete. Students submit decisions via the Web every week from January until April. In April, students travel to San Diego for a weekend to compete in an intensive phase where they make approximately six decisions and give a final presentation about their company to a panel of business executives. During the competition, teams also submit a business plan, goal attainment reports, and an annual report (Cotter & Fritzsche, 1995).

In the spring, 2001 we competed in the ICBPC for the second time. In our first attempt, we encountered many of the difficulties that any novice encounters in a new situation. We did not plan ahead for the required business plan and annual report, and we did not appreciate the production values that some schools put into those documents. We had no idea what information was supposed to be in a goal attainment report. Consequently, we were always pushing against deadlines and the quality of the reports was seriously lacking. It is important to note that in the first year, we ran the ICBPC as a club. Anyone who wanted to be part of the team could join but no one would receive academic credit for the experience. Luckily, eight people expressed interest. Later most students indicated that they enjoyed the experience even though they did not win.

Learning from experience, we decided to organize the competition as part of a regular class offering. In order to attract a wide variety of different business majors, we stipulated that our class would substitute for the capstone business class, Strategic Management. We also limited the class to fifteen students since we knew that this class had to work as one group. In the beginning, registration was light but as we started to market the course within the college and individually soliciting students, the course filled.

During registration, we also needed to raise money. It costs $1000 to register a team for the simulation. In addition, it costs approximately $200/student/night to send four or five students to San Diego to represent the class. Even with every student contributing $50 as a course registration fee, we were far from our goal. Fortunately, a local bank donated enough money to ensure participation.

There was virtually no syllabus for the course. Not, at least, in the sense of a planned sequence of topics and readings. ICBPC administrators determine all the dates for the decisions and reports. On the first night, we explained how the simulation worked and what we had learned from the previous year, along with some basic concepts in strategic management and decision-making. After that, students had to make decisions, analyze the results and decide what actions to take for the next week. At first the decision making process was tortuously slow; typically decisions took about six hours and hunches often substituted for solid analysis. As they struggled, questions and concerns from the students triggered decisions about which topics to cover and how to cover them. As the semester continued, students developed spreadsheets and forecasting tools, along with policies and decision rules that helped the decision making process.

As with the SSP project, some students were more proactive than others. Some students became quite excited about getting the results back while others just sat back and watched the others work. Since students were expected to take initiative and volunteer to work on tasks, this lack of participation became extremely frustrating when reports were due. For example, students had divided the business plan into

sections with everyone assigned to complete a part. On the night before the report was due, three students still had not done their parts and only five students showed up to proofread and make final corrections.

Five students went to San Diego for the intensive phase. We selected these students by eliminating any students who could not make the trip and having the remaining students make a presentation and answer questions about their company. Knowledge of the simulated business and participation in class became our criteria for selection. Interestingly, the students were polled anonymously for their nominations and they chose the same individuals to represent the class. With the most motivated students in San Diego, the concentration on winning became very intense. During the three-day event they got little sleep as they worked on making decisions and preparing the final presentation. Up until the final ceremony, we had no idea how the students fared against other schools. According to game rules, we could not watch any other presentations. Since presentations and reports account for 50% of the final score, any school could have won even if their company was not the industry leader. Fortunately, our students placed first. We were happy to see the students rewarded for all their efforts.

STARVING STUDENTS PRODUCTIONS

The idea of teaching entrepreneurship is not new. Many universities are recognized for their entrepreneurship programs (Enbar, 1999; Ivancevich, 1991) and while only 16 four-year colleges offered an entrepreneurship course in 1971, most business schools offer at least one course today. Spurring this growth in entrepreneurship education is the fact that new business incorporations have doubled over the last 20 years (Dickerson, 1998). Our primary objective with this project was to give students the opportunity to develop their skills by starting and operating an actual business. In effect, we were implementing a "learning by doing" approach.

The course, begun in Spring 2000, was comprised of a two-semester course sequence. We chose the spring-fall sequence to ensure that we would have a full twelve months to complete the project. As we designed the course, the marketing plan and fund raising would be completed in the spring semester, summer interns would keep the project moving through the production stage and in the fall, students would sell and market their product. The accounting year and academic year would end on December 31.

Our product, a musical CD, was based on a similar project that had been successful at Elon College in Pennsylvania. Two years prior to our project, Elon students had produced and sold a jazz CD. Since we were located near Nashville, Tennesee, we had a number of musicians, recording studios, and technical advice within a fifty-mile radius. We also liked the idea of selling a CD since it was a product that our students already knew and could get excited about.

Sixty-five students expressed interest in participating in this business experiment. We limited the class to twenty students. To make a final selection, we asked students to fill out a questionnaire that included major, course expectations, and the amount of time they were willing to put into the project. We selected students without regard to grade point average since research indicates that academic standing is not a good predictor of entrepreneurial success (Olson, 1985). Because we anticipated that much out-of-class work would be required, time availability became a major selection criterion. We also were interested in students that had some skill to bring to the business such as experience with recording studios. Our final selection contained junior and senior business administration majors. There were an equal number of males and females and, although the age range was 20 to 45, the average age was 21.

To reinforce the concept that students would have personal responsibility for running a business, all students were required to purchase two shares of company common stock at $10 a share. This was more symbolic than practical as the total cost of the project was estimated to be $15,000 based on the Elon project. At the end of the venture, any profits would be split equally among the twenty students after a small, undetermined percentage was placed into a fund to support future entrepreneurship projects.

When the students arrived the first day, they were unsure exactly what would be expected of them. They looked to us to provide the goals and, sometimes, the answers. They were accustomed to taking notes, reading text, and answering test questions. However, these skills are not very helpful in running a business.

We did not structure the company, Starving Student Productions (SSP). We hoped that a structure would evolve from the class and a leader would emerge. This proved to be problematic since no structure or leader emerged. Students used a one person, one vote model. We also did not assign students any particular task according to major. Students volunteered for tasks. For the most part, students did select assignments they felt the most comfortable in completing. Consequently, our accounting students did much of the company's books and the computer information majors created the Web page.

The first series of tasks focused on marketing research and market segmentation. Students researched area residents, students, music retailers and secondary sources (i.e., Billboard magazine, Entertainment Weekly, Variety, Census data). Based on this research, students decided to produce a rock music CD featuring a compilation of independent rock artists from the region, sell it for $12.99 to 16-30 year olds, and distribute it at area music and electronic stores as well as via the Internet. As students began to make decisions for their own company, they felt some power. They were business people.

Most students stayed excited until the problem of finding funds became apparent. The recording studio wanted their fee, in this case, $400 per song track for 12 songs, in advance. A few students volunteered to oversee the fundraising efforts of the company but by the end of the first semester, the students had obtained no new funding beyond the initial stock capitalization.

Fall marked several new changes. SSP was in debt. Over the summer, they had elected to borrow money from a number of sources. By September, they owed over $14,000. Since SSP had acquired debt, we imposed several new conditions. We formed a peer committee to oversee student performance and to provide a means to discipline freeloading behavior. We required students to keep journals and record daily their activities in SSP as a way to gauge individual participation. Furthermore, to encourage everyone's participation and to raise the needed break-even funds, each student was responsible for selling 100 CDS. Although selling 100 CDs would not be the final determinant of grades, it was a mandatory quota to receive a grade. Two students did not like the individual sales goal and withdrew from the class. Finally, we took more control of the class by setting deadlines for specific activities to take place. During the first semester, it became apparent that students liked to postpone decisions. By fall we had lost the luxury of time. There were only sixteen weeks left to sell enough CDS to repay thousands of dollars in loans.

Even with the changes, things did not always go according to plan. The original timeline called for CD production to be completed over the summer with the product delivered in August. Unfortunately, production difficulties occurred and another company had to be quickly found to manufacture 100 CDS (at a premium price) to sell at a scheduled Release Party. This was a major hurdle. Even worse, although approximately 125 people attended, only four CDS were sold. Therefore, the relatively expensive Release Party (venue rental, sound system rental, security, promotion costs, etc.) was financially unsuccessful. The loss of innocence was also significant. Many students had thought they would sell their entire allotment of CDs at the release party.

During the fall CD sales continued to be slow. Now the class was split in three factions. Approximately thirty percent of the students were developing new strategies to sell the CD. They planned another party on campus featuring some of the bands. This would be more successful than the first party in terms of CD sales. Some students started to go to various classes to promote and sell the CD. Fifty percent of the students just watched the others work. The remaining twenty percent of SSP members became the vocal critics of other students, the entire project and us. This was a very difficult time for everyone involved in the project. Although we did set some goals to make sure that everyone contributed and debts were paid, we did not want to direct the process. We felt it was important for students to find their own methods to sell CDs if they were going to learn about entrepreneurship. Consequently, we offered suggestions and waited for students to become motivated.

A wall of tension built up in the class. This tension escalated when we made it clear that we still expected everyone to sell 100 CDs. By constantly reinforcing this goal, most students understood that they were in considerable danger of failing the course. At this point, some students did not care about the business. They only thought in terms of passing the course.

To say things were bleak by November would be a serious understatement. However, just when some students had lost all hope, an alternative presented itself. The university bookstore management offered SSP the opportunity to staff a sales cart in the regional mall. The bookstore would pay the students 20% commission on all sales of licensed University merchandise and allow them to keep all proceeds from the sales of the CD. This sounded like a good deal to students so they voted to work the mall cart from November 20 to January 1.

Students worked over 890 hours at the cart. An analysis of participation at the cart showed that the most proactive students in the class put in 244 hours even though many of these students had already sold their 100 CD quota. These students were still very motivated. They arraigned special activities like having the college mascot appear at their cart. They had promotions such as buy $50 worth of merchandise and receive 10% off of the CD price. They often showed up at the cart during their spare time to encourage other students.

Students who were most critical of the business worked 159 hours even though they had not reached their individual target. These students saw the cart sales as a way to meet their quota. Some of these students proved to be good salespeople. Nevertheless, they often chose to work at the cart during class time to avoid class, did not try to clean up the cart, or put out new merchandise. When working, they often ridiculed other students who were attempting new sales strategies. These students continued to complain.

A third group, who had remained relatively inactive throughout the class but also were relatively non-complaining, contributed the remainder of the hours. It is this third group that became interesting. One of these students commented after working eight straight hours at the mall, that "being in business is hard work." As these students became successful at selling their CD to mall customers, their confidence and satisfaction grew. They started keeping a running tally of who sold the most CDs in any day awarding the "salesperson of the day." They even started to have fun with the task. One time they bought a small train set and attached a Santa doll to the tracks. Overhead was the slogan "Buy a CD and Save Santa". This may have been in questionable taste for some children and adults but it did appeal to their target audience and helped sell CDs.

Fortunately, the mall cart revenues generated sufficient revenues to more than cover all CD production and marketing expenses. This was not the ideal culmination of the SSP CD business plan but it did point out the importance of being flexible and responding to environmental threats and opportunities. Consequently, this project did make a small profit. All unsecured creditors (including the professors) were repaid; student-held stock was repurchased; and a portion of the earnings was reserved to fund future entrepreneurship projects.

THE GOOD

Implying that instruction via pure lecture is insufficient for teaching management skills, Mintzberg (1975) argued that cognitive learning "no more makes a manager than it does a swimmer" (60). November (1997) suggested that problem-based learning experiences that simulate the work environment are an appropriate bridging tool between academic study and the learning of attitudes and behaviors that will be required in the workforce. Both the Intercollegiate Policy Competition and the Starving Students entrepreneurship project created learning environments that were realistic and problem-based. Therefore, there were many reasons why we entered into these projects enthusiastically.

From a student's perspective both projects provided practical experience. Students were forced to confront real problems and to use their own creativity to find solutions. For instance, the ICBPC students quickly learned that they had to develop effective spreadsheets and decision-making tools if they were going to be successful in a very competitive industry. When the Code Red CD ran into production difficulties, students had to find alternative strategies to have a CD available at the release party. Both projects also forced students to develop people, presentation, decision-making, and sales skills. When ICBPC students realized that they were going to present their annual report to managers from Intel and Cisco, they spent all night revising their graphics and practicing their speech. Such preparation generally does not happen in a regular class where students are presenting to their classmates. One SSP student remarked that he had decided that Code Red was not going to sell itself so he decided to go door-to-door in his dormitory to convince students to purchase the CD.

From a faculty member's perspective, both projects allowed us to become consultants to our students. In both classes, we wanted the groups to be successful. As a result, we bounced around ideas with the students. Students saw their options and then decided in which direction they would go. Sometimes they made good choices, and, other times, they did not. Not using a traditional lecture format and working towards a common goal made us feel more like coaches than faculty.

From the university's perspective, both activities helped showcase the school's ability to offer "hands-on" activities to students. The College of Business gained regional recognition for having their faculty win

the Innovation in Teaching Award. Local television, radio, and newspapers carried stories about the ICBPC student's success in San Diego.

THE BAD

Faculty have debated the merits of experiential-based learning and even though we believe that it should be a critical component to a business school's curricula, we acknowledge there are some disadvantages. Some of our students came away from the project disappointed. For example, although we were clear that not everyone could go to San Diego, some students in the ICBPC were disappointed that they did not have the opportunity to travel and meet their competition in person. In the SSP case, students were amazed that the university and community did not embrace their project as wholeheartedly as they did. This became painfully obvious when few people or institutions were willing to contribute to the project. As a result, students were forced to borrow over $10,000 in order to manufacture Code Red. Both projects required that students spend considerable amount of time outside of class doing work for the class. We suspect that some students may have initially enrolled in the class assuming that there would be less work because there were no exams. Two ICBPC students were also encouraged to drop when it became clear they were not interested in contributing. Another ICBPC student complained that decision-making frequently went an hour or so after the scheduled end of class. In SSP, two students actually dropped the course after the first semester because they felt it was going to be too much work.

We also had our share of difficulties. Although our students were in the traditional 21-24 age range, they brought with them various experiences and maturity levels. Since these projects called for independent, self-motivated students, our best students indicated to us that they felt that both classes provided a great learning opportunity. Other students expressed frustration. In hindsight, the latter student group would probably perform better in a more structured setting.

Also, given the type of activity, we were often forced to make choices over what material to cover in class. In both classes, we were unable to cover the breadth of material that we normally cover in a traditional class. Part of the reason for this lack of time to cover material comes from the fact that "hands-on" projects tend to take on a life of their own. Classes are often driven by environmental events. For example, students spent over 800 hours in the mall between Thanksgiving and Christmas. During that time, the focus in class was on how to sell to consumers, how to display merchandise, how to keep track of inventory and even one class on how to operate a cash register. Moreover, just as students found the projects time consuming, we also found that we had to devote considerable time outside of class to allow for consultations or even in the case of SSP, working at the mall when no student in the class could be at the cart. A wide range of strategic business issues arose during the ICBPC competition, but it was almost impossible to predict which issue would filter to the top of students' consciousnesses until it emerged from their deliberations in class.

Finally, it became difficult to manage student and the school's expectations. During the ICBPC, both the students and the Dean often asked if we were going to "win". Even though we kept emphasizing that learning rather than winning was our main objective, we worried that our students would feel like failures if they did not bring back a trophy.

From an administrator's view, there are drawbacks to experiential learning. Both projects cost money. In SSP, the college lent the students $2500. Fortunately, the students were able to pay the money back but it was a risky investment. The ICBPC cost $3000. Last year, a regional bank established funding for the venture. Nevertheless, at a time when money is scarce on university campuses, it can be difficult to explain how $3000 can be allocated to fifteen students. Lastly, many universities use number of students in a class as a measure of faculty productivity. Both of these projects had limited class sizes of 15-20 students. Obviously not all classes can be that small and still maintain an adequate faculty/student ratio.

THE UGLY

Unfortunately, there were even some ugly sides to both projects that we feel are important to acknowledge so that others who attempt these types of projects can avoid the pitfalls. In the SSP project, a few students failed the course. In each case, the students did not make any attempt to sell their CDs. One student went so far as to ridicule students who were working in the class. Two of the students believed that they could not fail since this was a new course. Since the capstone course is necessary for graduation, the

students had to repeat the traditional strategic management course. However, this occurred only after they appealed their grades through three collegiate appeal processes and lost each appeal.

Most of our students want to travel. In some cases, going to San Diego was the first time some students had ever been on an airplane. Although we are the chaperones, it can be very difficult watching a group of university students who are old enough to go places alone and yet sometimes lack the maturity to make wise decisions. For example, during our strategic competitions, we have had a student lose his wallet at the airport on the first day so we had to finance his daily expenses and explain to security why he had no identification. On another trip, we had to search for a student who disappeared apparently in search of marijuana.

In all cases, these projects are team-taught. Since the SSP project was a two-semester class, each instructor received credit for teaching one class. With the ICBPC, one instructor received credit for the class one year and the second instructor received credit the next year. There are advantages to a team-taught system. Two instructors can split the time devoted to the class between them, making the class more manageable. Two instructors also bring difficult insights and experience to the project. However, if the instructors do not work as a team, the experience can be a nightmare. With SSP, the class was designed and initiated by two instructors. Before the second semester began, one of these instructors left for another school and a third instructor took her place. The replacement instructor was not as fully integrated into the project, and thus, could offer only limited support. Some of the students took this personnel change as an opportunity to try to create a rift amongst the instructors. Thus, when the goal of selling 100 CDs appeared unreachable to some of the students, they tried to lobby the replacement instructor to change the rules.

SOME REMEDIES

Hindsight can be twenty-twenty. At the same time, reflection does prevent us from making the same mistakes twice. Given the year we have had to reflect on our experiences, there are some things that we would do differently. First, we would have a better selection process for choosing students for the class. Originally, we just asked students how much work they were willing to put into the projects. As opposed to what some of the literature indicates, we found that students who had a marginal GPA did not do well in the class. For class projects, GPA may be an indication of a student's willingness to put effort into a class. Interviewing students could provide an opportunity for a realistic job preview. Additionally, assigning a task prior to acceptance into the course would give additional information as to student willingness and ability to return a quality product on time.

We would make sure the class is a credit-bearing course. In the ICBCP class, we originally started the project as a club activity. Given the amount of work involved in making decisions, many students could not become involved in the project given their academic course work. We found that giving course credit allowed us to attract more students to the competition. In addition, as a club, we received no course credit for spending hours with the activity. As a class, the project could be counted toward our course load requirements.

We would set realistic expectations for both the students and the administration from the very beginning of the project and keep repeating them throughout the activity. Our most important objective was in the process not the outcome. Everyone involved in the project needs to know that the experience is beneficial regardless of the result. Eighty percent of all new business owners go out of business. It was amazing that SSP did not go bankrupt but even if it had, students would have learned many valuable lessons.

At the end of any project, we would encourage students to write letters of support. This will help fund-raising later and help recruit new students. Funding is critical. We would try to secure all the funds needed for projects prior to the beginning of the project. When Elon College did their CD project, they had funding from the Coleman Foundation and their institution. SSP started out with stock money from the 20 participants, but there was no money committed by either the College of Business or the University. We would not undertake this type of project unless there is some funding. In our case, we had to loan students a considerable amount of money to keep the project afloat. Most professors cannot afford to take such risks.

Even though experiential projects tend to be unstructured, we would set firm guidelines for classroom participation. In the SSP example, students were given a quota of 100 CDs to sell. The idea of having a quota is a good one and is used commonly in businesses. However, students tend to have a short time horizon and do not allocate their time well. Students have become accustomed to waiting until the end of

the semester to write the term paper or read the text. This is not a realistic strategy when selling a product. A smaller goal of 10 CDs every two weeks would have prevented some students from waiting until the last minute to sell CDs. Weekly assignments and major projects every three or four weeks aided the process during the ICBPC competition.

Business owners face timelines on a daily basis. SSP and ICBPC students had a very difficult time making decisions. This points out the importance of setting specific timelines to make sure that critical tasks are accomplished on schedule. Also, students have little real experience making decisions, even in colleges of business. Students require a huge investment of time and support from the faculty, especially in the earliest stages of the project, in order to be successful.

It was difficult sometimes for us to sit back and let the students make decisions that we felt were inappropriate. Two examples in SSP were the rental of an expensive sound system and the purchase of 5000 bumper stickers to promote the CD. However, SSP was a student-run business and all promotional decisions were based on the student owners' votes. Even though faculty interference would seriously dilute the independence of the firm and control of the owners, we would spend more time pointing out the financial and marketing implications of every decision. The ICBPC team had initial problems forming a consistent strategy, could not maintain any kind of profit margin, and seemed obsessed with price-cutting. It took diplomatic, if relentless, questioning challenging and probing before clear goals, strategies, and tactics began to emerge.

Finally, there is the issue of time and effort. These projects are much more demanding than traditional classroom based courses. The physical and emotional demands on faculty can be extraordinary. In this instance, no additional compensation or release time was provided, and resource constraints were keenly felt, despite much favorable publicity and regional recognition. As a result of our experience, we strongly recommend that faculty considering such projects seek and obtain prior commitments of administrative support from their department and college. Even the most promising projects will be imperiled if starved of the most critical resources – faculty time and attention, and the minimum budgetary support to finish the job.

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