Failure to Launch: Ensuring a Smooth Start for your New Program

When the enrolment numbers came in, Joanna's heart sank.

The new program she had spent years developing and campaigning for had finally launched this year. Since that initial announcement, she had spent what little free time she had helping the school's marketing team get the word out and dreaming of the kind of numbers that would let her bring in a few other instructors to help teach the program.

She had already spoken to several of the other teachers in her faculty and found that some of them would be quite willing to help if it ever came to it. And she was certain she would need them: With the way the population was aging, everything related to seniors was a straining field in need of hundreds of new graduates to fill the job demand. There would be work aplenty, and the positions Joanna had seen during a cursory glance at a few job websites looked like they had all the bells and whistles that a new graduate would want. Certainly, she would have wanted those opportunities when she was new to the industry.

So why had only 2 students enrolled?

"Joanna?"

She looked up in alarm. The dean of the department had the door propped open, one brown boot wedged against the bottom to keep it from closing.

The dean's expression sent a chill through her.

"We need to talk. About the program."

"Okay."

That was it. It was dead in the water.

And worst of all, Joanna had no idea why.

In a good year, new programs are no small effort to launch.

Programs take significant energy, funds, and outright stubbornness to get off the ground, which means that a failure to flourish is all the more devastating to those involved. When coupled with a pandemic on the doorstep and tightened budgets, every new program is being developed with both the hope of success and the fear of being left on the cutting room floor.

In Joanna's case, as we see in many situations, she had already taken the steps to gather much of the basic information she would need to get approval to launch a program: She familiarized herself with the broad strokes of the population trends in Canada; she investigated the current job opportunities that would be available to students in the region; and she took the time to ensure that she had the curriculum and instructional supports necessary to deliver on the program in the future.

But was this enough?

Not quite.

When we work with institutions through our Program Feasibility and Review studies, population trends and job opportunities are often the starting point of our discussion, but they are far from the end point. Often, what differentiates a program that is wildly successful and one that simply checks the boxes is one key step in the development process: Consultation. Joanna's program might have done far better if she'd had both the support and the time needed to consult with two key stakeholder groups before moving forward:

- **Students**: The best program will fail in a heartbeat if it cannot attract the right students. But rather than handwringing and speculating about how they'll react to the program, we have found that it is best to *simply talk to them*. Students, especially those who have little-to-no personal experience with your institution, are quite willing and eager to explain exactly what about your program would attract or deter them. While you'll need to be prepared to talk to more than one or two to get reliable intelligence, it is well worth the effort to find them: Your program name might be failing to resonate, you program might be obscured by your broader reputation (why is an engineering school doing *that*?), or you might be missing some key attribute that they're looking for: You won't know unless you ask.

- **Employers and Industry:** Programs, particularly those that are aligned with specific career paths, also need to earn the respect and recognition of key employers and industry players in the market that students will be graduating into. These experts can speak not only to their current needs - the skills they want to see in graduates, the programs they wish were out there, whether or not they like to take on co-op students - but to the future of the industry as a whole. Their insight and guidance can help a program to realign with the needs of tomorrow's employers as well as today's.

These are certainly not easy groups to reach – especially when working with the kind of time limitations that most members of the Canadian academy face these days – but over the many years that we have spent surveying and speaking personally with these two groups, we've found that it is these consultations that identify the most important changes a program needs to make before it launches.

Programs today have one opportunity to get it right. We're here to help make sure that happens.

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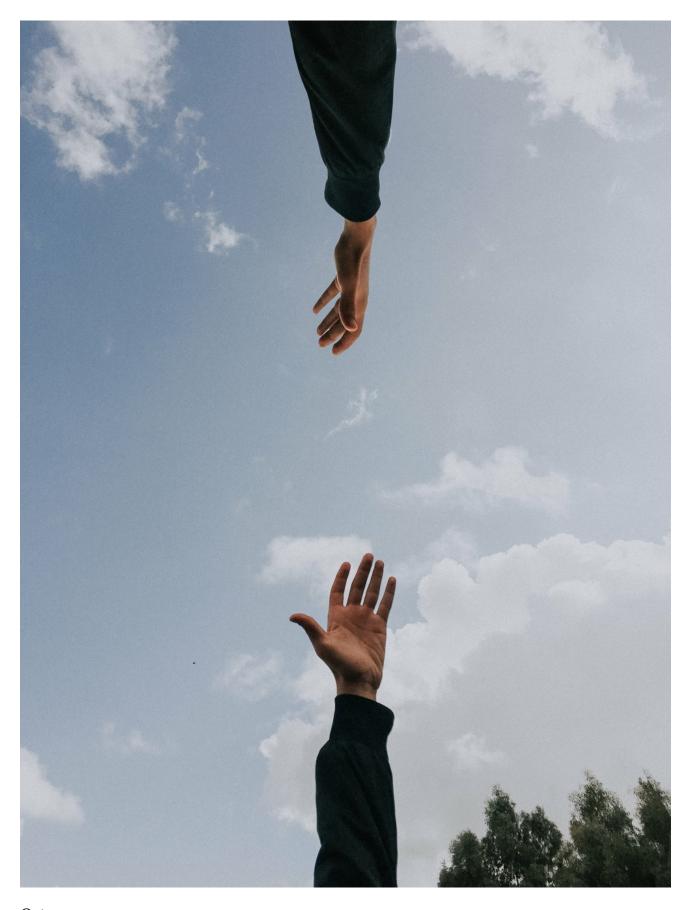
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