

When bad things happen to good programs: Lessons from a Failing Scale-Up

1. Grow slowly.

“Don’t recruit too many less experienced people at once. Less experienced people need more time, mentorship and training to excel. Effectively providing such support requires much more time and labor than we typically allow.” -Mitchell (2022) Building Resilient Organizations. The Forge

2. Motivation matters.

Offering money attracts different participants and decreases intrinsic motivation. This is known in psychology as the “overjustification” effect (Lepper et al., 1973).

3. Trust is essential.

Mentorship is based on mutual trust and respect. When the mentor and mentee have not chosen each other as scholars, but have come together for other reasons (e.g., to get a fellowship, to scale up a program), trust may never develop.

IGE: Enhancing Doctoral Research Training through Cascading Mentorship (Anteater Huddles).

July 1, 2021-June 30, 2024. PI: Barbara Sarnecka, UC-Irvine.

Brief description of program

- A cascading mentorship program where graduate students were trained to lead writing groups/work groups for peers and near-peers. It was based on a successful pilot study and on a writing workshop run by the PI with 5-10 PhD students at a time for over 10 years.

Administrative issues

- Coinciding with start of project, PI was appointed Associate Dean of Graduate Studies. IRB shut the study down for 4 months, citing an ethical conflict. IRB decided that PI could not administer study but must rely on admin staff in Dean’s office, who have many other tasks and are not trained in research. This led to multiple delays in study administration.

Scaling issues

- NSF-IGE funded scale-up of program from 7 grad students to 35. Experienced participants were greatly outnumbered by new participants, and the culture of the original workshop was not reproduced. “Hire slowly, always. Unintentional scale is an enemy to solid culture.” (Mitchell, 2022)
- Participants received 30 hours of training over 10 weeks, which it turned out was not enough to enable them to lead groups of their own. Previous successful group leaders had participated in the program for several years before starting their own groups.

Motivation issues

- The earlier, unfunded program was entirely voluntary, so all participants were intrinsically motivated. In the IGE program, participants received fellowship money. This introduced a new, transactional element into the program.

Trust issues

- In an ordinary mentoring situation, the mentor and mentee have chosen each other carefully. In this program, many students didn’t know the PI’s scholarship and did not aspire to do research in the PI’s area. They may have placed less value on the advice of someone outside their field.
- In Year 2 of this three-year project (Fall 2022) graduate students went on strike at all ten UC campuses. It became clear that all university programs (including this cascading mentorship program) were viewed by some students as suspect. Participants objected to mentorship meetings being held during the strike. (“Requiring attendance is just a way of keeping us off the picket line.” “Participating in this program is a form of service, which we are withholding during the strike.”) PI agreed to make attendance non-mandatory. Participation dropped from 30 participants to 5-7 participants, where it remained after the strike ended.
- Graduate students did not necessarily want writing help from their peers. The most common problem for all groups was simply that few or no graduate students showed up to receive peer mentoring.