

The Benjamin Franklin Scholars Council,

1998-2001

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Here I account how the Benjamin Franklin Scholars Program at NC State University changed between fall 1998 and spring 2001. I was a member of cohort nine, the entering class of 1998, and Chair of the Franklin Scholars Council in 1999-2000 and 2000-2001.

1 INTRODUCTION

Students don't stick around for too long, so we have a hard time knowing the history of a University. Famous events of 1997 are forgotten by 2002. This document attempts to prevent part of the Franklin Scholars' history from becoming legend and forgotten.

Many important events tangential to the Council's development are left out of this history. Notably, Dr. Porter, the Scholars' Engineering advisor, died in the summer of 1999. His integral role in the program cannot be overstated. In 2000, a scholarship was established in his honor. Dean Rajala became interim advisor before Dean Lavelle was appointed as a permanent replacement. In 2001, the Dr. Hoffman award was established to recognize another founding faculty member who taught freshman for the program's first ten years. Dr. Hoffman entered partial retirement in 2000. In his place, Dr. Herkert began teaching the freshman Scholars' introductory course.

2 THE TAKEOVER: 1998-1999

In 1998-1999, before cohort nine took over by a coup of sorts, the Franklin Scholars Council wasn't doing much. I found out about the Council in the first Franklin class: then MDS214H, Technology and Values, taught by Dr. Hoffman. The Council Chair came into the class and held elections for representatives. Andy Goldstein, Kevin Hill, and a few others became our spokespersons. They told us the little that happened at the monthly meetings, which didn't sound like much. We had no fall retreat, no peer mentoring, no kind of get-together.

Our fellow freshmen were really interesting. Our talks before class didn't satisfy us. In September, our classmate Kevin Hill began a listserv on his Sullivan computer called "COHORT-9." We subscribed everyone by passing around a sheet of paper to collect email addresses. The class generated an amazing volume of correspondence. We wrote more than ninety messages over a three-day period, discussing all sorts of topics. I specifically remember an Atheism discussion, because a few people were devoutly Christian and at least one of us was a devout Atheist. We would bring books to class to share sources.

Our cohort became friends because of the listserv. We coordinated a dinner for Dr. Hoffman at Brother's pizza to thank him for teaching us. Dr. Hoffman had introduced us to college. He had respected us as adults. He inspired us to challenge one another outside of class to consider other beliefs and to learn outside of class. The listserv, and taking Dr. Hoffman to dinner, were great first steps for cementing our cohort's friendship and pride.

We did nothing during the next semester. I was expecting the Franklin Scholars Council to announce a social event or activity to help us keep in touch. The only meeting was for an "MDS Info-session," a one-hour meeting to suggest how to graduate with an Engineering degree and a Multi-Disciplinary Studies degree¹. Many of us in

¹At the time, virtually all Franklin Scholars received an MDS degree rather than a traditional degree like English or Philosophy.

cohort nine attended, but the atmosphere was nothing like MDS214 and we didn't have much time to talk. Andy and Kevin occasionally informed us that the Council was still doing nothing.

The Franklin Council election was announced towards the end of the year. Despite all the inactivity, the Chair planned to run again. Many people in my class wanted the Council to be more active than it was that whole year. I announced my candidacy and asked for support—for people to show up and vote. Other people discussed which positions they wanted. We were confident about our chances.

On the big day, maybe seven upperclassmen showed up. Fifteen or more people from cohort nine were in attendance. We had a clear majority. No one from the earlier cohorts knew us or knew of what we planned to do. From this disjoint set of students, there were two distinct candidates for Chair. As the cohort nine “nominee,” I won. After the position of Chair, cohort nine proceeded to elect themselves to most of the other offices. We alienated the earlier cohorts from the Franklin Scholars program, as any strong cohort tends to do, but felt like we had accomplished something amazing.

3 THE ASCENSION: 1999-2000

The new Council had a lot of plans for our year in charge. We had no concept of what a “normal” Council did. There was no Franklin Scholars' lounge before the spring of 2000, so we met in Talley Student Center. We scheduled biweekly meetings. We took minutes and even reviewed them out loud, which were easy steps in the right direction but which had never been done before. Every Council member was on a committee. Committees reported on their meetings. We created a program-wide discussion listserv and began to “modernize” the web site. The treasurer was regularly called on to suggest ideas for income. Many of the administrative ideas came from my experience freshman year on Student Senate.

There were some other ideas that explicitly *not* taken from Student Senate. Our

meetings were small, so there wasn't any need for parliamentary procedure. We had a printed agenda but no reason to *force* the Council to abide by the agenda. Storytelling was valued: it helped motivate the Council and generate ideas. I tried to keep meetings short, but there was no rule: I just thought, "I am wasting these people's time by forcing them to stay here," which helped me keep us on-topic and organized. The Council was a hard group to keep focused, but with careful moderation they were very good at brainstorming and affirming ideas.

We had three key issues for 1999-2000: to integrate cohort ten into the Franklin Scholars, to have a retreat, and to offer social events during the whole year. The Council was biased towards the "fun" events because they were easy and they were what we really enjoyed to do.

To make the freshmen feel at home, I contacted them by appearing at orientation, writing a letter to all of them over the summer, and by meeting most of them their first day on campus. We elected representatives in their class and put the whole cohort on our discussion listserv. Many of them went on the fall retreat. All told, we might have overdone it a little—many of the freshmen dropped out, perhaps alienated by the barrage of events and email—but they had every chance to meet us and enjoy themselves.

The fall retreat was at Umstead State Park because our advisor Dr. Herkert said previous years' Scholars had met there. I booked Umstead's log cabin early in the summer; because the cabins are cheap, they fill up immediately. The retreat was scheduled for the first possible weekend after other popular orientations like the Park Scholars' retreat. Because the retreat was so early, many people came. The cabin was full. We had plenty of food, but few activities. People got a little antsy and played "truth-or-dare" games. While I had a great time teaching people my card game, "Global Thermonuclear War," and hearing total strangers' darkest secrets, I would advise that anyone else who ever runs a retreat plan at least a few activities in advance, preferably

creative games which let the Franklin Scholars use their intelligence. The retreat was nevertheless a success and became a barometer for future years' outings.

The Council put on many social activities that year which the College of Engineering occasionally paid for. We would meet for coffee, and put on a few other activities like ice skating. We sent ten people to Service Raleigh. While attendance was high at the retreat and that year's "MDS Info-session," taking over the Council did not necessarily mean lots of people would come to events. I showed up at at least one Witherspoon cinema "movie night" to meet only one other person.

Generally, the year was active. We created and sold a Franklin Scholars t-shirt. We had a spring retreat for the first time. Bob Bryan, who worked for Student Affairs, had a beach house and for some reason allowed us to use his house for free. We took a large group—maybe sixteen people—to this huge, beautiful house for a weekend. It was a year of "firsts." The Council had really pushed the Franklin Scholars program forward.

At the end of the year, when we voted on the 2000-2001 leadership, we met in Talley's Multipurpose Room. We had a lecturer and a real dinner. In the elections, many cohort nine members were re-elected. I ran again for Chair because I felt more could be done, and because the Council needed at least one more year of guaranteed activity to begin any lasting traditions.

4 THE FORTIFICATION: 2000-2001

The second year was much more difficult than the first: we now had traditions to continue, more people came to the meetings, and despite our best efforts cohort ten didn't seem to be bonding in the way cohort nine had. Not that the year didn't turn out to be a success! We had a great staff and another historic year.

Mostly, the "traditions" to maintain were fall and spring retreat. I was more slack about scheduling the fall retreat, so we met in October instead of September. The later a retreat is, the less successful it is. Ten or twelve people showed up, most of which

were not freshmen. The spring retreat had a higher, more diverse attendance. We went to Veronica Brumbaugh's lake house near Charlotte. Her father took us waterskiing.

We wanted to outdo our previous year with social events for meeting the freshmen. Nichole Stout, from cohort ten, was the social chair for 2000-2001. She did a stupendous job of coordinating our whole year's social programs. Though many of us had lost our enthusiasm, she took time to schedule and announce regular activities like coffee nights. Others helped, too: Leif Johnson planned a ski trip, and Nick Maslow took a few of us backpacking.

We tried a few other new things, like implement a mentorship program. The mentorship program was intended to replace my going to every freshman's room at the beginning of the year. Mentors were to meet freshmen and take them out to dinner. They were supposed to let the freshmen know that they had an upperclassman resource. The program flopped: people didn't know what was expected of them. We should have made expectation sheets to guide mentors and freshmen. Freshmen didn't know what the mentorship program was and couldn't figure out who their mentors were. We should have planned a communal dinner, so that even if a mentor doesn't show, freshmen could still talk to someone.

We tried to expand our professional development and service projects. We reached out to Gregory Poole Equipment Company. Kim Grau planned service projects like going to the Carnivore Preservation Trust one Saturday. We sent another, larger group to Service Raleigh. New activities were risky because we never knew if people would be interested, but we kept innovating and expanding the Council.

More people came to the Council meetings. Though this might seem like a good thing, it wasn't necessarily. When new people showed up, it took longer for the Council to bond. Each additional person was a new brainstormer, but also a new arguer. Small group practices like ignoring the agenda and storytelling had to stop. Members felt like they had less responsibility because it seemed there were others to do the job for them.

The same happened in committees. We had no good check system on committees—not even something as simple as asking for minutes. The committee chairs, or sometimes one or two younger members instead, became overburdened with activities and tended to burn out. Effective Councils, almost in a self-limiting way, will tend to draw larger crowds. We managed to handle it well in 2000-2001.

We met the high standards of 1999-2000 and surpassed them. The Council had planned weekly social events, biweekly meetings, and monthly service activities. We had another lecturer speak at an even better end-of-the-year dinner.

A new Council was elected. Though I planned to be a student for another two years, I did not run for an officer position. I wanted to guide from the sidelines, because I knew that my energy and creativity were waning, and because the Council needed to grow into new leadership. The Franklin Scholars still need a few things—like a history!—to keep the Council on track and to prevent a year like 1998-1999 from reoccurring, but things are going fabulously so far. We had fall and spring retreats again in 2001-2002 under Ben Lawson's capable leadership. The program-wide discussion listserv is almost as strong now as our COHORT-9 list was my freshman year. Cohort nine has the largest number of graduating members in the program's history, in no small part because of our pride in taking over the Council and because of the community we developed our freshman year. Later cohorts, like numbers eleven and twelve, have helped the committee system develop.

5 CONCLUSION

Hopefully this history has given you a better sense of where the Franklin Council has been and has inspired you to consider what the Council can become with the effort of a few motivated people. Cohort nine didn't do much, ourselves, except invest a few hours of time acting on what we wanted. We found that the Franklin Scholars program was flexible enough to use for our own ends; through it we met people, had retreats, served

the community, and got to spend time with the few people who understand why anyone would get degrees in both Engineering and Humanities. I urge you to spend your time talking with creative, motivated people like the Franklin Scholars and working with them to continue making history.