

SURVIVING THIS PLACE

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Mark Lehman had been hired as the first Dean of Extended Learning and Public Services at Carolina College. He had sought the job to get away from an institution where he had worked for a decade building a continuing education program only to have his work devalued by a new administration. Now, on his first day at work, he found himself without an office, desk or computer and wondered if he could survive in his new position.

Mark Lehman was dressed in coat and tie as he arrived for his first day on the job as Dean of Extended Learning and Public Services at Carolina College. It was a new beginning for him after things had turned sour in his previous position at Virginia College. But, today he felt some of that old pain as he stood in the door of a converted science classroom where his staff of two assistants sat expectantly at their desks. He had not been assigned an office nor provided a desk or computer. "Am I going to survive this place?" he murmured silently.

VIRGINIA COLLEGE

The advent of a new president at Virginia College was the beginning of what Mark Lehman now looked back on as the most painful period in his career. Priorities of the new administration did not embrace the continuing education operation that he had carefully built since his arrival at the College ten years earlier. As a consequence, the support needed to sustain the operation soon melted away and he found himself increasingly involved in strained exchanges with his new boss.

By all accounts, his work at Virginia College had been very successful. The College was originally a normal school for women. It remained an all-woman's institution for 60 years before it became coeducational in 1972. Located in a beautiful valley near the Blue Ridge Mountains, the College developed into a comprehensive institution with undergraduate and graduate programs. Enrollment increased dramatically and currently stood at 8,534, with students enrolled in programs both on and off campus.

Mark arrived at the College a decade ago as its first director of continuing education.

Until he arrived, continuing education was dabbled in by a department here or there, but nothing was done college-wide. Mark's job was to change that. And, he found fertile ground in which to work.

CONTINUING EDUCATION AT VIRGINIA COLLEGE

He focused on credit programs and soon had school teachers earning their re-certification credits on weekends. And, shortly thereafter, highly motivated adult students were able to earn a bachelor's degree through an individualized general studies program. The success of these programs led to the initiation of programs for graduate students as well. A cohort program for gaining the master's degree in curriculum and instruction was developed using the weekend format.

He adapted the University of Pittsburg model for independent study through distance education for use at the College and assisted with the development of the distance learning classroom equipped with two-way video capability to deliver courses to a neighboring city forty miles away.

The Elderhostel program and summer conference activities flourished under his watchful eye, and he was successful in attracting grants to support his department's work. But, his most challenging task was developing a two-plus-two program between the College and a neighboring community college. He had successfully negotiated several two-plus-two degree programs when the new president took the reins of Virginia College.

Mark's boss, the Provost, had been a candidate for the presidency and when he was not selected, he left. Soon a decision was made to subsume continuing education into the graduate school. Mark was out of town when the decision was made and he was not happy. The new graduate dean was someone with whom he found it very difficult to work.

This was the beginning of one of the most difficult times that he had ever experienced in his career. He realized that he had to get out of there and embarked on a major job hunt. It was an interesting time in Virginia. The state was doing buy-outs to reduce the number of state employees. Mark applied for the buy-out and quickly accepted a position in a New Jersey institution that had an extensive outreach program for adult students.

His buy-out request was denied. Mark now had to face the truth that he needed the buy-out money for a down payment on a home. When the buy-out was not approved, he had to call the New Jersey college to say he could not take the position.

CAROLINA COLLEGE

Mark continued his job search in earnest. In January he interviewed for a position at Carolina College. This was a college located in a resort area near the beach in the Carolinas. It had begun as a junior college in the mid-1950's with classes that met in the local high school. By the end of the decade, it had become a branch campus of the state's major university. With strong local support the college moved to its present 187 acre site where, in 1963, the College's 110 students entered the doors of the campus's first building. By 1975, the college had become a four-year institution and had awarded its first baccalaureate degrees.

Carolina College continued to grow and in the early 1990's it changed from a branch campus to an independent state college. By this time its enrollment had climbed to 4,400 students representing 40 states and 26 foreign countries.

Mark's interview was mostly positive. He did wonder, however, what he would be getting himself into and was not very excited about living in a resort-type community.

During the interview he met with the deans, vice presidents, a group of faculty members and the president. The deans were pleasant, but when asked what opportunities they saw for distance learning, their blank stares told Mark that they did not have any idea what he was talking about. They seemed to equate distance education only with satellite downlinks and did not see themselves getting involved in that business.

He liked the vice presidents and the president. Each of them tried to sell him on the area. "Booming area, nice place to live", were the words used by the president. But, no one seemed to know what Carolina College wanted to do in the area of continuing education.

He recognized at least two continuing education programs operating at the College. Third Quarter was a program for retired people and an interdisciplinary studies degree program was also available, although the College did not see it as continuing education. He learned that certain public service centers were also doing continuing education activities. He was bothered that there might be some turf issues at the college that could turn out to be problematic.

In the course of the day's interviews, Mark was told that the College had a partnership with the local community college to do some programs at the nearby Air Force base. He liked that because of his positive experiences in Virginia with the community college. Then he picked up that there was a lot of competition between the

College and the community college. He was getting different messages that were confusing to him.

Several faculty members gave him the most trouble. In his interview with them, two or three started ripping into him.

“Your position will be funded at the expense of faculty positions.” one said.

“I’m not sure we need your position here.” chimed in a second. Mark could sense the hostility.

As luck would have it, Mark was offered the position at Carolina College in March and he accepted. With the courage that comes with having secured a new job, he wrote a letter to the president of Virginia College appealing the negative decision on the buy-out. It was not long before he got a call saying his buy-out had been approved. His last day at Virginia College was to be April 1.

FIRST DAY ON THE JOB

He received several thousand dollars in the buy-out and his home in Virginia sold very quickly. It was a very stressful time as he prepared to move his family a few days before Memorial Day.

On his first day, July 1, Mark showed up to work with suit and tie and went to the continuing education office. It was one big room that housed two staff members. There was no office for Mark. No desk, no computer.

He sat down with the two staff members and tried to get a handle on what they were doing. “Very little” he found. He was confused that the institution was paying two salaries for people to do so little. They had in direction and no leadership. They did not know what to do.

He rolled his eyes, “What the hell are we going to do here?”

“Where are we headed?”

Then silently he murmured, “Am I going to survive this place?”