

LEADERSHIP & GOVERNANCE

The Improvisational President

By *Eric Hoover* | FEBRUARY 08, 2016

TOWSON, MD.



André Chung for The Chronicle

Jazz musicians appreciate risk, says José Antonio Bowen, who puts that attitude to work at Goucher College. "The willingness to fail is deep in the core."

new?

Mr. Bowen, 53, has brought that sensibility to Goucher College, not far from downtown Baltimore. Like many small residential colleges, this one is weighing questions about how to adapt and survive. A year and a half into his presidency, Mr. Bowen wants to enroll and support a more diverse array of students while somehow continuing to pay for everything that defines the place, which promotes community service, lets undergraduates design their own majors, and

From the beginning, José Antonio Bowen improvised. As a boy he played a cheap electric organ, combining notes every which way, absorbing all the sounds. By the time he became a professional pianist, altering a melody onstage was second nature.

Jazz musicians take risk by the hand. "The willingness to fail," he says, "is deep in the core." Why do the same old thing when you can chase something

requires them to study abroad. Goucher has carried a liberal-arts tradition and a \$50,000-plus price tag into an era when many skeptical families seek a hard-and-fast route to a career.

To lead such a college these days, a stomach for uncertainty helps. And uncertainty, Mr. Bowen says, calls for a kind of improvisation, a willingness to reshape. He has championed new ways of thinking about old challenges, especially in enrollment. He believes the admissions process is too complicated, tilted in favor of wealthy applicants, and tethered to a narrow understanding of student potential. "It's insane," he says.

Although such criticisms aren't new, one idea Mr. Bowen dreamed up sure is. Within days of arriving at Goucher, in July 2014, he proposed an unprecedented experiment: Letting applicants send a two-minute video instead of a traditional application. All they would have to do was record themselves answering a question — "How do you see yourself at Goucher?" — complete a brief form, and provide two samples of high-school work, including a graded writing assignment. The video application was supposed to give the college a meaningful glimpse of applicants' talents and promise, including those who might not shine on paper. Mr. Bowen hoped the straightforward approach might broaden access — a new doorway for a generation that's grown up with a camera phone in its pocket.

The plan was a welcome innovation. A stupid idea. A well-meaning gesture. A desperate publicity stunt. People have said all of the above. Sure, Goucher's admissions office wasn't the first to dabble with videos. But allowing a 120-second soliloquy to trump a high-school transcript — widely considered the lodestar of admissions evaluations — alarmed some presidents and pundits. The college, which already did not require ACT or SAT scores, now made submitting grades optional, too.

What happened? Of 3,243 applicants for this year's freshman class, 64 sent videos, 51 of them were accepted, and 15 enrolled. Although those numbers are small, the new option attracted a more racially and socioeconomically diverse group of applicants than the regular process did.

Goucher officials say they weren't too concerned about application totals. They mostly wanted to see how students chosen by nontraditional means would perform after enrolling. On that count, the college is proclaiming success. As it announced last week, the cohort admitted through the new process earned a 3.15 grade-point-average last fall, slightly higher than the 3.11 average for the entire class. All but two of the 15 students returned for the spring semester.

"We were able to predict college success by watching a video just as well as we did with transcripts and test scores," says Mr. Bowen, who believes that higher education is hungry for new ways of evaluating applicants. "I really do think there's a revolution coming in college admissions."

A wall in the administration building is covered with photographs of Goucher's past presidents. Mr. Bowen doesn't look like any of them. His father, an American, met his mother, a Cuban, in Mexico City after World War II. They settled in San Jose, Calif., where the young Mr. Bowen enrolled in public school and learned to speak English.

Eventually he got a real piano and classical training. He picked up various instruments, performing at weddings, pizza parlors, and clubs. He stayed out until 3 a.m. on the day he took the SAT. As a teenager he shared a stage with Liberace, who told him to perform each tune precisely the same way every time. The young musician was drawn to a "looser music." After college he played with Stan Getz, Dave Brubeck, and other jazz kings.

Mr. Bowen never let go of music. After



André Chung for The Chronicle

Mr. Bowen believes the admissions process is too complicated, tilted in favor of wealthy applicants, and tethered to a narrow understanding of student potential. "It's insane," he says.

across the campus to jam with students or faculty and staff members, who might show up with anything — a bass, a mandolin, a euphonium. "I like accompanying," he says. "My job is to kind of make the whole thing hang together."

He sees his official role the same way. Presidents do a lot of listening. Sometimes they must push tempo. And they always have an audience.

One Tuesday morning in November, Mr. Bowen greets members of the college's Administrative Employees Association, who've gathered for a regular meeting. In his dark jeans and blazer, he looks like he might've just slid out of a concert — except for the plastic nametag. He's come to discuss the five-year budget plan. "Things are tough," he says.

Recent enrollment fluctuations have complicated financial projections at Goucher, where the tuition-discount rate for the freshman class is north of 50 percent. Attrition has shrunk the junior class considerably, which means less revenue and a lower graduation rate. "That number's going to hurt us in the *U.S.*

earning a Ph.D. in musicology and humanities at Stanford University, he taught at the University of Southampton, in England. Later he directed the performing-arts program at Georgetown University and was dean of Southern Methodist University's Meadows School of the Arts.

These days a poster of John Coltrane, regal and brooding, watches over his office here. An electric piano waits in the corner. The president often wheels it

News rankings," someone says. The audience is attentive, but some members seem anxious. One woman wants to know if the college is admitting less-qualified students than before. Another chimes in: "We are projecting an operating deficit. So what happens on June 30th?"

Mr. Bowen tells them he expects the college to hit its enrollment and revenue targets this year. But he's clear about the challenges. "We have made a choice as a campus to be a more inclusive place," he explains. Enrolling more low-income and first-generation students means spending more on financial aid and support services. A number of decisions loom, like whether to convert triples to doubles in an older dorm, which surely would mean happier students but also less housing revenue.

"So is that clear? Whether or not we have raises is based on enrollment and retention," he says, looking around the room, "but also on the choices we're making?"

Everybody wants more applicants with 1400 SAT scores and whose families can pay full freight. An entire enrollment-consulting industry helps colleges woo those applicants. Such students are scarce, though. "The market that's growing is the kids who can't afford to pay, who are less academically prepared," says Mr. Bowen, who wants the campus to better reflect Baltimore's racial and socioeconomic diversity. Two-thirds of Goucher's undergraduates are white, and about a quarter receive Pell Grants.

As Mr. Bowen sees it, a college can go overboard in chasing "better" students, the kind who light up academic scoreboards. "We want to readjust to help the students we have be successful," he says. There's a catch, though. "If nobody pays, we go out of business."

Like most colleges, Goucher needs affluent students, too. After leaving the meeting, Mr. Bowen walks to another building to welcome a large group of college counselors from private high schools throughout Maryland. For 20 minutes he speaks off the cuff, riffing on how the Internet has made knowledge abundant and what that means for colleges. He explains why instructors must use digital technology to engage students outside the classroom and increase face-to-face contact within it, a theme he explored in his 2012 book, *Teaching Naked*.

Mr. Bowen circles the room, slicing the air with his hands, pausing here and there to make eye contact. The audience follows his every move as he describes recent changes at Goucher. Restructuring freshman orientation to emphasize relationships instead of information. Giving students meal vouchers to take professors to lunch. Designing a new dorm, with smaller rooms and bigger lounges, to promote more interaction among students. Administering noncognitive assessments to students to see how, or if, their "grit," their resilience and determination, improves during their time at Goucher.

"The idea is to figure out what we're good at," he says of the college, "or what we might not be good at."

Early feedback has convinced Mr. Bowen and other administrators that the doubling down on relationship-building is benefiting students. "You want them to be successful," he says, "but you also want them to be happy."

After a round of applause, one counselor speaks up. "Thank you," she says. "Thank you for being different."

Tina Forbush leaves feeling inspired, as if she had just witnessed someone superbly jamming at a concert. She liked what Mr. Bowen said about perhaps requiring all seniors to take a MOOC. She was intrigued when he asked if Goucher

still needed majors.

"There's a real value in somebody who's willing to push beyond the edges of what we're used to," says Ms. Forbush, co-director of college counseling at the Park School of Baltimore. "It makes for a more interesting and vibrant institution."

Music isn't fixed; it's mutable. Mr. Bowen has always understood it that way. He would rather play a solo that bombs than play the same solo he did last night.

For colleges, though, innovation is tricky. There's often comfort in conformity, especially for admissions offices, where the stakes are so high. The wrong idea could cost a college dearly.

When Carlton E. Surbeck III, director of admissions at Goucher, first heard about Mr. Bowen's plan for the video application, it gave him pause. After all, he and his colleagues had long told prospective students and college counselors how much Goucher valued high-school work. Squaring that with the new option, he says, "was difficult for the admissions staff."

Mr. Surbeck now counts himself as a fan of the new application. He was impressed by the "depth of thinking" he saw in most students' video submissions. Unless colleges figure out new ways to reach prospective applicants and assess their potential, he says, many campuses will become "pretty vanilla, pretty one-dimensional."

Known as "Corky," Mr. Surbeck has worked at Goucher for 20 years. The president, he says, has raised morale on the campus, by throwing out ideas, by encouraging faculty and staff members to think harder about the college's strengths. That's crucial for an institution that has long struggled to distinguish itself in a crowded market, he says. "Over the years, we were less of a first choice for students — a safety school. He's helping us build affinity for Goucher."

Mr. Surbeck has seen more faculty members than ever before step up to interact with prospective students. Each department now has a "yield" captain, who shows up at recruitment events (or ensures that a colleague will), and contacts accepted students. He credits Mr. Bowen for inspiring greater faculty participation. "He's very good at explaining to them that *they* are the product," he says.

Mr. Bowen earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry, the same subject that Scott Sibley teaches. The president's analytical approach to key questions has impressed him. "He's comfortable with numbers, survey data on outcomes, and student satisfaction," says Mr. Sibley, chair of the faculty. "That brings a fuller picture of the challenges liberal-arts colleges are facing."

Goucher, of all places, probably wouldn't take to a president who gave too many orders. Although a few faculty members say they worry that Goucher is lowering its standards, many speak highly of Mr. Bowen. He has embraced the college's collaborative streak, Mr. Sibley says. After the admissions-video idea was hatched, the college held meetings about it, soliciting feedback from professors, staff members, and students. "People had a chance to voice concerns," he says.

Though at first taken aback by the idea, Mr. Sibley later embraced it, helping to design the scoring rubric's three categories (content/thoughtfulness, structure/organization, and clarity/effectiveness). He and other faculty members helped the admission office review the submissions. "In the end," he says, "we got good students in the door."

After Goucher announced the new plan, a few members of Colleges That Change Lives, a consortium of liberal-arts institutions that shares its name with a popular guidebook, wondered aloud if the college's membership should be revoked. Although that didn't happen, public scorn came from various corners. In an opinion essay published by *The Chronicle*, Brian C.

Rosenberg, president of Macalester College, applied the phrase "absurd and dangerous" to the video-only option: "It sends the wrong message to students about the importance of working in high school."

Mr. Bowen later wrote an amicable note to Mr. Rosenberg, who responded in kind. Macalester's president hopes to increase racial diversity on his own campus, where three-quarters of domestic students are white: "We're doing a better job, but not a good enough job yet." The admissions office, he says, now conducts more holistic evaluations than before, going beyond numerical analyses to consider the opportunities that applicants did or didn't have.

He praises Mr. Bowen for trying something different. "College presidents, in general, are too risk-averse," Mr. Rosenberg says. "I do have admiration for those who are willing to go out there and take risks."

Without that willingness, he believes, the status quo tends not to budge. "Sameness gives the appearance of safety, when often it is actually more risky than change," he says. But he still thinks the video application is a bad idea.

All the bristling over Goucher's experiment says more about those doing the bristling than anything else, some observers suggest. "It's threatening to the academy — someone's out there saying, 'We're doing it wrong,'" says Martha (Marty) O'Connell, a senior college counselor at Garrison Forest School, in Maryland, who likes the video option. She has counseled first-generation students who were intimidated — overwhelmed, even — by the length and complexity of conventional college applications. "It's a huge barrier," she says. "They'll say, 'Why can't I just tell somebody who I am?'"

Ms. O'Connell, a former vice president for enrollment at McDaniel College, sees on many campuses an unwillingness to innovate. She understands it. "There's a fear of introspection, at a time where people are worried about their colleges

closing," she says. "José's poking at things, saying, 'We don't need these traditional metrics and measures.' "

Those measures, Mr. Bowen believes, won't serve an increasingly diverse population of high-school graduates very well. Students perhaps like those who arrive by bus at Goucher late one recent afternoon and gather by the fireplace in the admissions office. They're high-school sophomores and juniors from a couple of local public high schools, and, for the most part, their parents did not attend college. "I was very much like you," Mr. Bowen tells them.

He then relates a story he's told many times before. One day his high-school counselor handed him an application for Fresno City College. "It was good enough for me," he remembers the man saying. That angered his mother, who, though she spoke little English, knew that José's 4.0 grade-point average might entitle him to other options. She marched into the counselor's office, dressed him down, and took a college application on her way out.

After mailing it, Mr. Bowen remembered only that the college's name began with an S. Weeks later, the acceptance came from Stanford University, where he would earn four degrees. "I am here because of that accident," Mr. Bowen tells the students. He wants their college search to be purposeful.

He tells them to apply to at least one Ivy League college, where their education will be "free" because of generous aid packages for lower-income students. Do not limit your options, he says: "It's all about 'Show me the money!'" He tells them not to fear a college's price tag, explaining tuition discounting along the way. And he urges them, wherever they might end up, to go see their professors. "That's what all the rich kids are doing."

Afterward, Mr. Bowen walks back to his office, where he regularly meets one-on-one with students. Today's appointment is with Adam Geller, a sophomore who, on this chilly afternoon, strolls in barefoot.

For a half-hour the two discuss curriculum and campus activism. Then Mr. Geller pulls out a notebook and reads a line he wrote: "The purpose of a liberal-arts education is to decrease the imperviousness of middle-class students to learning."

Mr. Bowen frowns at the ceiling for a moment. "Hmm," he says. "We say the purpose of a liberal-arts education is to create voracious, self-regulated learners."

The scene offers a reminder: Goucher is different. This quiet campus, a speck on the map of the nation's colleges, is an outlier that enrolls about 1,480 undergraduates, a sliver of them because of their two-minute videos. For this fall's freshman class, just 69 applicants, a handful more than the previous year, sent video applications.

Whether any observers in higher education think that signals a revolution, as Mr. Bowen hopes, or anything at all, might depend on the type of college they work for, its market position and goals. The many admissions officials who say video applications won't catch on elsewhere are probably right. Goucher is different, and that's kind of the point.

One could get lost in debating the merits of this or any new wrinkle in the admissions process. Perhaps the most important aspect of Goucher's experiment is the restless spirit that propelled it. Will more colleges see fit to define and evaluate at least some applicants' potential in new and different ways? Or will sameness prevail?

The dependability of conventional measures has long worried Mr. Bowen. Back in the third grade, the boy who would grow up to become an award-winning composer — who would perform with many virtuosos, improvising his way through thousands of songs — was given a standardized test of musical aptitude. He failed it.

Eric Hoover writes about admissions trends, enrollment-management challenges, and the meaning of Animal House, among other issues. He's on Twitter @erichoov, and his email address is eric.hoover@chronicle.com.

