Time for Bold Leadership

In this fourth and final article on mergers, I will share my ideas about the key link between mergers and bold leadership. But first, my premise and two caveats.

My premise is that now is the time for bold leadership. A short-term "band aid approach" might get you into next year, whenever and whatever that is, but it won't get you to a stable and bright future. If you are willing to consider bold approaches, the time is right for dramatic change because your board, your faculty, your staff, your alumni and your students may only be focused on survival. You get to define what the future could mean and how best to approach it.

The two caveats … first, my ideas may not be right for you. They may not fit your institution. They may not be feasible. They may not be different than those strategies you have already considered. My goal is not to give you your roadmap, but rather to give you approaches and resources for consideration.

Secondly, having taught leadership for over 40 years, I know that one size doesn't fit all. You have to lead boldly, but you need to be true to your own style and values. History has demonstrated that effective leaders come in all shapes and sizes. My encouragement is that you lead more confidently and more creatively.

As I suggested in previous articles, the first step in this planning and change process is to define what is essential for your institution. Essential means critical to your identity and critical to the quality you and your community expect from your programs and services. This is the ultimate destination of your journey. How do you get there with no compromises and no frills?

With this framework, you can assess your institution. This includes an honest assessment of the programs and services you need to have, the quality of your available resources (personnel and material) and a holistic sense of your environment. The expression I like to use for this prefatory process is to "dream real." The current challenges provide an opportunity to be aspirational, to remove the historical limits. But even though this process will define a new reality, it still needs to be a reality.

Here's an example of what I mean. I was leading this type of planning process several years ago at a small college. We decided that we wanted to grow and develop our STEM programs. It was part of our mission. We had some strengths that we could build upon. There was a need for these programs in our region.

As we were defining the details and the plan, some of our faculty proposed that we become a quality center for the study of physics. According to them, all that was required were 50-75 new students interested in majoring in physics and eight additional terminally degreed faculty. At the time, we had two physics majors and one faculty member. For us, physics was only a resource to our other science programs.

A few miles away was a highly selective institution renowned for its science and technology programs.   This institution only had ten physics majors and two dedicated faculty. It was clear that for us, physics was a dream, but not a realistic one. We ended up keeping the necessary support courses, eliminating physics as a major, and found other work for this professor teaching the physics courses and other science courses.

All planning for mergers needs to be assessed through two different but complementary perspectives. As I have said, is the program/service mission-centric? Are there gaps in your educational, support and/or administrative resources? Remember … addition by subtraction allows for adding.

If your planning passes the first test, it needs to be considered in terms of viability, cost and enrollment potential. Some ideas are inherently good, but lack a clear way to implement, would necessitate unreasonable resources (i.e., new facilities), or are devoid of an interested student population that could be recruited and retained.

The first approach, and one that you have likely tried, is internal consolidation -- merger by integration. An example of this is the elimination of courses, programs or services. But to what degree have you considered the full integration of programs and services?

For example, at many institutions that have small but essential programs in the various disciplines within the humanities, one possibility might be to offer a new degree in humanities, rather than separate degree programs in English, History, etc. Some of these disciplines could be concentrations within the more generic degree. For this to be effective, however, ultimately you need to offer fewer total courses

(electives) and must provide many courses that serve multiple concentrations. You also need to convince your humanities faculty that this is the best strategy!

This approach works in the service area as well. Various components of student services, for example, could be integrated into one office, with staff cross-trained to better serve students and to reduce the number and also increase the functionality of personnel.

This approach can be used to make decisions within your institution. But another strategy is to collaborate with peer institutions -- merger by cooperation. If you define something as "essential" for your degree … for your students … why not partner with colleagues. You can use technology (online instruction) or multiple sites (students transported to campuses) if, for example, you really value the opportunity for your students to have the chance to study foreign languages like Mandarin or Arabic.

We need to accept the fact that in some areas of study, there is no real difference between public and private, highly and less selective, big and small, sectarian and non-sectarian institutions. For example, a course in Calculus or 17th century French poetry has the same basic syllabus at every college/university.

You may have to deal with challenges related to faculty contracts, unions, etc., but every institution in America is currently in some degree of crisis and may be more willing now to discuss cooperative efforts. This could be a way to add courses/programs by subtraction. You might also share academic leadership (e.g., a department chair). You will likely improve educational quality, too. Now is the time to cooperate and collaborate in bolder and more creative ways.

This approach has potential in service and administrative areas as well. Consider multiple institutions sharing one Athletic Director, one Registrar, one Head Librarian or one IT Director, for example.   This structure is really no different than a single institution exercising leadership that currently oversees multiple campuses/instructional sites and/or supports a large staff. These reorganizations could be structured as a joint appointment or a contractual service.

This type of approach could be used to share facilities as well. If you analyze the usage of specialized instructional space, for example, you might find that you could partner with another institution to maximize space usage and reduce staff/costs. Typically, the only real challenge with this is scheduling. A space utilization study will often reveal that there are more hours in the day than you may

be using currently, and a seven-day a week schedule should be considered. Students and faculty rarely object to evening, early morning or weekend classes.

The final, and most innovative and bold approach is to merge two or more institutions -- merger by incorporation. Sadly, the few multi-institutional mergers over the past two years have usually been precipitated by weakness/fragility and are euphemisms for acquisitions. Unsuccessful merger discussions often break down over concerns about mission and historical identity. I wonder if this fervor for "identity" is worth jeopardizing your future?

I would suggest that the opportunities to create a new model are greater now than ever before because of the current climate. The integration of academic programs, administrative services, leadership, facilities … the merger of institutions…only takes courage, vision and creativity.   It can result in more than just survival. It can create a more robust and competitive institution, a new university, an exciting long-term future.

Here are four keys to this type of multi-institutional merger/planning:
- You will need a high level of board support before you get too far. Trustees, especially if they are not alumni, will better understand the value of a merger as a strategy. They see it in their worlds all the time.

- You will need to quickly develop a thick(er) skin. You will get accused of heresy. It's really no surprise that faculty/staff, students and alumni always want to protect the past … and their jobs.

- Communicate, communicate, communicate. Make sure people know what you are doing and why you are doing it from the beginning. The message should be that quality improvement, the college/university of the future, are more important than simply budget cuts and survival. It's better that these initiatives are shared rather than done in secret. And you might find more buy-in and creative ideas from your faculty/staff than you might expect.

- If you don't already have one, hire a good lawyer. Personnel matters, existing contracts/agreements, negotiations with accrediting agencies/state and federal departments can be the most difficult challenge and will need expertise to resolve.

This has been a brief summary. If you want to explore any of these ideas in more

detail, feel free to contact me or anyone at Hyatt-Fennell. We want to serve as a resource … to help you develop your roadmap… to support you as you find your way to your preferred future.

T.S. Eliot wrote, "Only those who will risk going too far can possibly find out how far one can go." I believe that higher education is not facing its demise, but rather has been presented with a unique opportunity for rebirth. In the end, I believe that you can do it ... so take the risk!

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