A recent Moody’s Investor Service report predicted that closure rates of small colleges and universities will triple and that mergers will double in the coming years (https://www.moodys.com/research/Moodys-Small-but-notable-rise-expected-in-closures-mergers-for--PR_335314). The decision to consolidate or merge institutions is never an easy one, but one that is being considered and implemented more frequently by higher education leaders. The experience at Georgia Regents University (GRU; now named Augusta University), the result of the consolidation of Georgia Health Sciences University (GHSU) and Augusta State University (ASU), can serve as a guide to successfully completing these often very complex mergers.

One of the most frequent questions I receive is, “What are the critical elements that position a consolidation or merger for success?” Overall, the experience at GRU indicates that while there are myriad issues integral to success, there are six critical and essential elements: a compelling unifying vision, the right sense of urgency, a committed and understanding governing body, the right leadership on the ground, a robust project management system, and sufficient dedicated resources. In brief, let’s review what each of these might entail.

A compelling unifying vision is the first and most critical element. The vision should clearly articulate why the consolidation is the “right thing,” and “the right thing for all parties.” It should be a unifying statement that clearly and in simple terms informs the university and broader community why the resulting institution will be more strongly poised for success, as well as why that success will be critical in advancing individual faculty, staff and—most importantly—student success. Communicating the vision broadly, deliberately, repeatedly and consistently is critical. And is not as easy as it may sound given the wide array of constituencies we serve and the emotional connections these stakeholders have to our institutions. Hence, a careful, thoughtful and bidirectional communication plan must be designed and resourced as part of the pre-consolidation effort. The earlier the better, since it should also help build the necessary sense of urgency.

Successful institutional change is always best served when there is the right sense of urgency. Instilling a sense of urgency among faculty, staff and students requires greater transparency about both what is working and what is not working at the institution, and even more importantly, what the challenges are that lie ahead. Considering that most of us academic leaders spend a good portion of our time serving as cheerleaders, sharing less than flattering information broadly about our performance and future, while positioning the consolidation as one of the strategies to help address current deficits and future challenges, is difficult.

And infusing just the right degree of urgency into the equation requires careful planning. Too much can bring panic, paralysis or exodus (and generally all three). Too little, and few in the university community, will understand—and embrace—the consolidation as a positive initiative or at least a necessary step. The sharing of data must be done thoughtfully, with great clarity and simplicity, and it must educate listeners as to what the data mean, and how they compare. Transparency without education is no transparency at all.

A committed and understanding governing body is another critical element. Governing bodies must be unwavering in their resolve, willing to make the hard decisions, understanding of the perils and risks to the implementing teams, and understanding that the process of consolidating and merging such culturally rich and complex enterprises is not always pretty and will not be without its bumps (some bigger than others) and mistakes. Governing bodies must be willing to listen and gather information before making a decision, but must be united in their resolve once a decision is made. And these oversight
bodies must be willing to go to significant lengths to protect the leaders they have designated to carry out the difficult task ahead.

Most governing boards are composed of volunteers, some with limited knowledge of how universities and their cultures actually operate, and are often distant from the epicenter of the transformation being undertaken. This mandates careful and detailed education of these bodies and their members regarding the process and risks ahead, well in advance of the decisions to be made.

*The right leadership on the ground* is vital for a successful consolidation or merger. Not all leaders in academics embrace change well, and some of us favor incrementalism as the preferred mode of growth and change. But the process of consolidation and merger, since it occurs rapidly (i.e., one day you are two or more institutions and the next day you are one), does not allow for an incremental approach to the process. In fact, the further you drag out the process the more difficult it will become, as factions and siloes within begin to coalesce and harden. And while some academic leaders prefer to avoid risk-taking, the process of bringing two or more institutions together is by nature a major risk, not only to the institution but also to those leading the initiative. To be successful, governing bodies must choose the right leadership team, often from outside the current institutions, to lead the complex process of consolidation.

It is worth noting that the right leadership only succeeds if it has the right team to rely on, including faculty and staff. Implementing such a large change in the nature and culture of an institution cannot be done alone, and collaboration with stakeholders across all campuses and institutions is both necessary to smooth the path toward consolidation and the right thing to do.

Finally, there are two important operational elements that will greatly facilitate, if not determine, the success of a consolidation or merger. One is the development and implementation of a **project management system**; a system that is nimble but robust, and a staff experienced and dedicated. A system that is able to readily assist in managing the timely completion of the hundreds of different tasks pertaining to a university’s infrastructure and operations. Secondly is the need for **sufficient dedicated resources** to offset the many expenses incurred during the consolidation, including the cost of meshing IT, HR, facilities and research systems, signage, branding, communication, etc. Such resources should include not only monies and capital, but also dedicated personnel. These resources should be above and beyond those needed to maintain the normal and optimal operations of the universities, because consolidation does not forego the need to stay fully operational on behalf of our students and faculty.

While providing these six critical elements does not, of course, guarantee success (which will often be determined only after many years), the absence of strong commitment around these six essential fundamentals will seriously jeopardize the potential for a successful outcome to the detriment of the faculty, staff, communities and students involved.

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