negotiating a consolidation in higher education

By Bonita C. Jacobs
Higher education has faced an economic storm over the past several years that has included reductions in state support, significant budget cuts, increasing tuition, and demands to improve academic quality and workforce development. In fall 2011, the University System of Georgia responded with a bold plan to consolidate some of the state’s 35 colleges and universities as a means to increase educational attainment levels while also creating a more efficient model for higher education. Georgia’s successful execution of this plan has yielded some valuable lessons for other public universities that are facing similar demands to increase their value in an era of Shrinking resources.

In January 2012, the board of regents announced that eight of the state’s schools would consolidate into four institutions. Among them were North Georgia College & State University (NGCSU) and Gainesville State College (GSC). Located in fairly close proximity—about 30 miles apart—the two schools had numerous existing partnerships. Despite that, due to very different missions and campus cultures, the news was shocking for many.

NGCSU, founded in 1873, was a comprehensive university with a residential campus in Dahlonega and about 6,100 students in highly competitive baccalaureate and graduate programs. Also, federally designated as one of the nation’s six Senior Military Colleges, one of the university’s signature programs is its 750-member Corps of Cadets. GSC, established in 1962, was a state college that featured mostly associate degree programs and select baccalaureate programs. It enrolled about 8,600 students across two commuter campuses, one in Gainesville and one in Oconee County. As a result of its award-winning student-success initiatives, GSC students had a strong record of academic success when transferring to other institutions, including NGCSU, to continue their education. Further, GSC and NGCSU were scheduled to jointly open a new two-plus-two campus in Cumming in fall 2012.

It’s a Process, Not an Event . . .

Prior to the decision about consolidation, the president of GSC had announced her plans to retire in June 2012 and, as president of NGCSU, I was named the president-designate of the new institution. With an aggressive timeframe of 12-18 months allotted by the board of regents to prepare for consolidation, we plowed into the details of how to bring these two institutions together as one university. We quickly identified that the optimal time for the consolidation to become effective would be January 2013. The most significant reasons for that timeline related to the semi-annual meeting schedule of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC) and coordination of federal financial aid.

A detailed implementation prospectus had to be prepared and submitted to SACS-COC for consideration at its December 2012 meeting. Though we had those milestones in sight, our mantra was, “It’s a process, not an event.” The planning process revealed that consolidation would be effective in January 2013, it would take time to fully evolve.

At the core of our local planning process was a Consolidation Implementation Committee, a 25-member group of faculty, staff, student, alumni and community representatives. That group led and deliberated some of the most emotional, public issues related to consolidation: the institution’s new name, the mission statement, a new visual identity and a new mascot. The recommendations and decisions made about most of these issues were informed by online surveys and focus group sessions conducted with students, faculty, staff, alumni and community members. The board of regents selected the University of North Georgia as the name for the institution, from three recommendations, and approved the mission statement at its May 2012 meeting. This work and a decision about these items early in the process helped guide other work and processes still ahead.

Because each school had its own mascot, development of a new mascot for athletics and student spirit was an opportunity to connect our campuses and provide a common identity. A survey generated more than 750 different options, which were whittled down by committee to three finalists. In an online survey, students overwhelmingly selected the Nighthawk, a bird indigenous to the region covered by the university, as the new mascot.

Operating parallel to the Consolidation Implementation Committee were more than 60 work groups composed of faculty, staff and students to study and make recommendations on complex issues related to academic affairs, student affairs, alumni relations, admissions, human resources, business operations and much more. These groups were coordinated by an executive planning team composed of vice presidents and other institutional administrators overseeing broad areas of responsibility.

The early stages of the process, including campus-based mission development workshops, were helpful in understanding campus histories and in dissolving inaccurate perceptions. The process helped identify common values and strengths. Both schools had track records among the top performers within
their sectors in the University System of Georgia and the institutions shared many alumni and community supporters. We promoted the fact that many students began their college career at GSC, but transferred, performed very well and graduated from NGCSU. This would be an important point for us as we focused on the ability of the new University of North Georgia to provide multiple pathways to increase the college-going and completion rates.

Based on research of other institutions with multiple campuses and degree programs, we adopted a tiered tuition plan that maintains financial access through one tuition level for associate degree programs—which are available on three of our campuses—while maintaining separate admissions standards and tuition necessary to sustain the rigor of our baccalaureate programs, also available on three of our campuses. This new model is scheduled to be implemented in fall 2013.

One of the most challenging aspects of consolidation was the expectation to reduce costs and expand academic programs to multiple campuses to serve a growing student population. Some of the cost savings were clear from the outset—e.g., a reduction in the number of cabinet-level administrators—but finding efficiencies will need to be developed over time. There has been a natural ebb and flow of anxiety, coupled with enthusiasm, as our faculty and staff dealt with uncertainties, restructuring and implementation of operational changes. Because both institutions have been somewhat understaffed for our service levels and we were continuing to grow, we announced that we did not anticipate any reduction in force.

We developed an organizational structure designed to serve a 15,000-student population. Our campus communities have responded with a can-do, collaborative spirit that has demonstrated a deep commitment to this process and its success.

There are many issues that are ongoing. These include consolidating the institutions’ budgets and student information systems, developing uniform policies and procedures, standardizing faculty workloads, developing a plan to address differences in base salaries for faculty and staff, implementing a sustainable tuition and fee structure, and expanding best practices in student support services across campuses. We are using data-based decision models to strengthen our enrollment management program, develop a new strategic plan, share promising practices, and search for cost efficiencies.

**Innovation That Benefits Students and the State**

Our two institutions were selected for consolidation because of our individual strengths and the opportunities to meet the needs of the northeast region of Georgia. Today, the University of North Georgia is the state’s seventh-largest public university. With four campuses located in the fastest-growing area of the state, we offer more than 100 programs of study ranging from certificate and associate degrees to professional doctoral programs.

Because of the university’s larger footprint, the region’s growth, and a high demand for professional degree programs, we anticipate steady growth. With assistance from the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students, located on the Dahlonega campus, we are streamlining the internal process for students to easily transition from associate to bachelor degree programs. The cost savings realized by restructuring the university’s administration and reinvesting into the institution will allow UNG to expand baccalaureate and graduate offerings in appropriate locations to strategically meet the higher education needs of the students and communities across our region.

By increasing access to educational opportunities, UNG is primed to increase the college completion rate in this area and support the state’s Complete College Georgia initiative. This will directly and positively impact the region’s workforce and economic development opportunities. The consolidation process is not easy, but UNG will provide a unique, incredible opportunity for the students and region it serves.

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