

ADDITION THROUGH SUBTRACTION

Building off my first article in this series, the metaphor for my ideas about mergers is a roadmap (“Any road will take you there if you don’t know where you are going.” --- attributed to Lewis Carroll). This article needs to begin with the guidelines for plotting the roadmap of your institution.

The reality we are all facing is that budgets must be reduced to regaining stability at best but only surviving at worst. I understand the difficulties you face not knowing what will happen and when it will happen. But my thesis is that you can ... you must ... do two things simultaneously. You must reduce expenses/increase revenues AND you must improve quality/sharpen focus. I believe you can work your way out of the COVID-19 disaster in a way that makes you better. I believe strongly that you can achieve both goals.

So, if you are still reading, allow me to start with a story:

Early in my career, I was fortunate to have a mentor who was patient and generous. As I was facing my first challenges of righting an institutional ship that was in peril, he said, “The secret is addition by subtraction!” I was clueless, but he patiently explained.

First, you can’t be all things to all people. If you try, you will be average at best ... unless you have unlimited resources. Parenthetically, and in case you do not know, institutions with seemingly unlimited resources (e.g., Harvard) are cutting programs, cutting staff, and not funding every program. In fact, they have never funded every program to the degree needed for excellence. Back to my story...

My mentor’s advice was to determine what you can be good at achieving, perhaps even achieving greatness. And times of challenge and crisis are the best times to do this. It will take a little more time, but it sets the right path forward.

You need to understand that anything you do ...everything you do must align with your mission and values. We are good at figuring out how to fit everything under our mission umbrella. But this is the time to make the hard judgments about who you are ... who your founders wanted you to be ... what is your clear place for the future.

And whatever you determine to be your essential mission will require resources -- human and material, both internal and external. The key is to pick the right things!

His second piece of advice was to go through this process ... draw your roadmap ... in an inclusive and transparent way. Everyone needs to have a voice to some degree. Everyone needs to know what the plan will be, every step and every rationale. There needs to be widespread ownership and a high degree of input into planning.

You may not feel you have the time to do this. Actually, it doesn't have to take that much time. In my experience, it can be done well and does not need to take forever. More about this later. Perhaps there's a strategic planning article in the future...

But my mentor emphasized that you cannot afford to skip the planning step. That's when I first heard the Lewis Carroll quote and my mentor's questions: "Where do you want to go. Where does your institution need to be? You had better have a clear destination!"

From this advice, I developed guidelines and rules for mergers in every way. And I practiced by these guidelines and rules for the rest of my professional career. Even in the best of times:

- I never approved anything without a compelling and clear mission-driven rationale.
- I never approved the addition of a course, a concentration, a program without either eliminating one, or at least identifying what might be eliminated.
- Budget allocations were always based on putting our resources where we could be great, not equal shares to everyone.

And everyone in the institution knew that these were the expectations! I trained my Board and leadership teams that these were immutable parameters.

The golden rule ... you must achieve addition through subtraction. If you know you have to take something away before you can add, you will make better decisions and only add things that increase the value/quality of the educational experience.

COVID-19 is a crisis. But it really can be an opportunity. Rather than a desperate frenzy to find a short-term solution, I am suggesting that you develop a long-range plan. A plan that brings you into the future as a better institution.

I have been a department chair, a VPAA/Provost twice and a President five times. I didn't always pick or approve the right things the first time. I didn't always have the choice (limited resources). I also made my share of mistakes. But I say with

all humility that every institution I led was healthier when I left the position, stable and ready to face challenges, and on the road to becoming much better if not great!

The integration of programs/services is the first concept of merging. This means the elimination of courses, concentrations, academic programs, student services, athletic programs, etc. This means merging within an institution and between institutions. This means making hard decisions about personnel and will be the starting point for my next article.

Get stronger and better by doing less. Your decisions may not be popular, but they will likely be right. And the roadmap will get you where you want to go.

Please know that I am available to discuss this further. Remember ... the entire Hyatt-Fennell team is here to help you. All you need to do is ask.

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