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PLANNING FOR 2020 ... BUT WHAT ABOUT 2021 AND BEYOND?

College presidents and senior administrators are actively planning for the reopening of campuses for Fall, 2020. With the future still uncertain, some are already thinking that they may not be able to open until January, 2021.

Questions/concerns about:

- How will you achieve your 2020-21 enrollment goals?
- How will you retain your current students?
- How will you balance your budgets ... 2019-20 and 2020-21?
- How will you deliver instruction in the post-Corona world?
- How will you keep your resident students safe?

These questions and more are likely in the forefront of your ongoing discussions with Boards of Trustees, Cabinet/Senior Staff, Faculty Leaders, SGA Boards, community leaders, etc.

Oh ... and don't forget that you will need to re-energize your fund-raising efforts, and those Chamber of Commerce meetings will return soon.

When I was a president, I vividly remember staying up nights worrying about what students did overnight and on weekends... hoping my phone wouldn't ring. If I was a president now, I would be up all night worrying about whether or not I would have students to worry about!

These challenges are real, especially for small colleges. These times are unique ... there is no "playbook" and the future is as unclear as it is daunting.

But I believe that now is the time to think about the long-range future ... before that future is determined for you.

I believe that now is the time to think about "mergers" in the broadest sense of the word and in ways that will impact the future of your institution for years to come.

Merger is defined as a consolidation. The obvious benefit is to save money ... balance a budget. And this is important, especially to your fiduciaries. But I define it differently.

Consolidation is not compromise. Merger needs to be the strategy to make education better ... to ensure that your education is as strong, as vibrant, as high quality as you need and want it to be. And the assumptions and pre-conditions are clear and explicit:

- Mergers must be made with your mission, educational values and identity always in mind.
- Mergers must do nothing to diminish your history, your reputation and your traditions.
- Mergers must simultaneously result in economy AND preserve quality.

If done correctly, mergers recreate the college without changing the essence of the college. The educational values remain the same. The characteristics of the degree remain clear.

In the subsequent issues, I will discuss the three dimensions of mergers in some detail:

- 1) Integration of programs/services
- 2) Consolidation of faculty and staff
- 3) Two (or three) schools become one

Planning mergers are hard to do. That's why we do so little of it or only to address a financial crisis. The value of merger is very difficult to communicate effectively. That's why we hide behind Board mandates regarding budget issues.

This is not meant as a criticism, but rather a statement of reality. If leadership was easy, more people would be good at it.

In my experience over the past 20 years, colleges find it difficult to discuss mergers, and even harder to take action for clear reasons. The discontinuation and/or merger of programs/services is impactful for students, faculty and alumni. Consolidation of faculty and staff, which is a euphemism for "cuts," is traumatic for everyone and the hardest decision a president makes. These are not inanimate objects ... these are real people with lives, families... they are often your friends and colleagues.

And institutional mergers are resisted by Boards like the plague! Oh wait, we are experiencing a plague now! The arguments about mission and identity and physical space are no longer as important as survival... quality survival.

The point is ... right now you have everyone's attention. They are all nervous, scared and worried about their future and the future of their institution. They are looking at you for leadership. Now is the time to act in big ways... ways that sustain a long future, not just one year, one semester, at a time.

There is a quotation (attributed to Lewis Carroll) ... "Any road will take you there if you don't know where you are going." I hope that I can help you remember where you want to go and delineate a roadmap that will get you there.

In subsequent articles, I will lay out the parameters of these various approaches to mergers. And I will conclude with some ideas about how to engage the conversation with minimal drama.

Your leadership really needs to focus on sustaining a healthy and vibrant educational experience that continues to thrive after you retire to write your book about how you survived Covid -19. And this may help. It could be your last and best chapter!

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