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PLANNING FOR 2021 AND BEYOND IS CRITICAL ... BUT IT WILL REQUIRE BOLD LEADERSHIP

By Dr. Jack Calareso, Hyatt-Fennell Executive Search

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 around:

- 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.

There are three dimensions of mergers to consider:

1) Integration of programs/services

These are my guidelines and rules for mergers in every way. The goal is addition by subtraction, not just a balancing act.

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

And everyone in the institution need to know that these were the expectations! The Board and leadership teams need to embrace these 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.

2) Consolidation of faculty and staff

My advice is again that you should look at the institution and not just the budget. Consolidation of faculty and staff is really consolidation of programs and services. The easy solution is early retirements and open positions. But I recommend a more pervasive look at the entire institution of the future. The key questions:

What are the essential elements of a liberal education (assuming that you are committed to a foundation of liberal arts and sciences)? What does it mean to have a degree from XYZ College or ABC University?

What are the most important educational goals of a pre-professional program (if this is key to your mission and identity)? What distinguishes a Nurse or a Teacher from your institution?

If you, your faculty, your Board, your students and your alumni define this, then perhaps you no longer need the plethora of electives and courses in every discipline. Understanding that professional skills and knowledge evolve over time, it may serve students more to have the necessary foundation.

It really is fine, in fact I would argue that it's a sign of greatness, if every student takes the same courses that signify your educational values. This is your education -- your degree.

This same logic should apply to academic and co-curricular programs. Define your focus and priorities. What is more important -- more viable -- to have small numbers of students in many programs or robust and high-quality programs in mission-related disciplines and activities?

Decide which services are essential to student success while they are at your institution and after they graduate. Retention, academic excellence, life skills and values, and future employment might need to be more important than other activities. This is your degree. These are your students. These will be your alumni/ae.

After you survive COVID-19, and you will, wouldn't you like to have a semester where you are not having to cancel classes because of low enrollment, or losing every men's volleyball match because you only have nine participants? Isn't it more important to increase retention even if enrollment decreases in the near future?

3) Two (or three) schools become one

This is where bold leadership is essential. And there are degrees to considering partnerships and mergers with other institutions. I define this as 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.

But 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.

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.

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!

Jack P. Calareso, Ph.D.
Senior Consultant
Hyatt-Fennell