



## MERGING UNITS / COMBINING DEPARTMENTS - QUICK TIPS

Within a university, academic units (e.g., colleges, schools, departments), are established as unique, independent entities with robust curricula and research portfolios. As fields of scholarship evolve over time, existence as a separate unit may no longer be relevant. At that point there are generally three possible outcomes: 1) allow an increasingly irrelevant enterprise to continue to exist; 2) eliminate the unit along with associated curricula and migrate tenured faculty to units with similar interests; or 3) merge the unit with another. Of the three choices, merger is generally the outcome most often selected as the least painful and most constructive way forward. This path comes with predictable difficulties that are often underestimated. The suggestions that follow are derived from observing successful and less-successful mergers. To the extent possible, any merger process should engage affected faculty, stakeholders—including alumni and employers of graduates—and administrators.

There are typically three steps in the process:

1. An analytical phase in which relevant considerations are articulated in a comprehensive report,
2. The development of a merger plan that outlines the proposed structure and governance that is either approved by faculty vote or administrative fiat if that is the decision process in the institution and,
3. Implementation.

### *Considerations During the Analytical Phase*

- It is useful to create a merger study committee with appropriate representation of interested parties from each potential merging department. In most cases, the administrator with direct supervisory authority over the units (normally the dean) should appoint and charge the committee. It can be good practice to solicit nominations and work to include opinion leaders where they emerge.
- A firm deadline for submission of the report should be established and rigidly observed.
- The merger study committee should be chaired by a respected faculty member from outside of the college and it should be staffed by one or more external individuals. These practices help to avoid any sense that the answer is known in advance. If the answer is pre-determined, don't waste the time of a lot of people. This will only undercut your credibility and reputation as a leader. If there's a hard decision to be made, do not try to dress it up by seeking consensus—if the consensus does not emerge and you must act anyway, this could be very damaging to you and the unit/s you lead.
- Pertinent data should be made available to the committee. Financial information should be available and shared with those who ask to examine it.
- The committee should hold as many public hearings as necessary to garner perspectives of affected individuals on the merits or disadvantages of the proposal.
- The compiled report should be delivered to the appointing administrator and, after review by that individual, made available to the departments affected for a defined comment period. If necessary, corrections and responses should be noted in the event of errors or misunderstandings.





## *Development of the Merger Plan*

- In most cases, the governing documents of the institution will require a vote by the affected faculty to approve a merger plan.
- For the vote to take place, a thoughtfully-prepared merger plan should be developed by a “merger” committee carefully formed with representation from all affected groups. The leadership of both affected departments should participate in the selection of individuals for this service.
- The merger document should address the plan for each significant issue likely to be encountered, carefully avoiding acrimonious entanglement with non-significant issues. Because some issues, especially fiscal and new or revised positions, may require approval by the dean, it is advisable for a member of the dean’s staff to serve as an ex-officio member of the committee.
- The institutional governing documents may require hearings convened by the campus faculty governance structure, review by the governing board, or other bodies prior to a merger decision. In such case, those requirements should be determined, laid out publicly, and addressed at the appropriate points in the process.
- The institutional governing documents may also require the development of new by-laws for the merged unit to be a part of the approval process. In this case, a separate committee should be appointed to develop the proposed by-laws, to avoid commingling the questions of the merger logistics with the ongoing governance issues addressed in by-laws.

## *Completing the Decision and Implementing It*

- After sufficient deliberation and in a timely manner, faculty input should be sought to address key concerns, a final recommendation made to the dean, and submitted ultimately to the overall governing authority of the university. During this process, the date for the merger should be established.
- It is usually the case that it will be necessary to appoint a leader (either a chair or department head for the merged unit). If at all possible, this should be accomplished prior to merger. If not, a respected individual should be appointed as interim for a term. In particularly contentious mergers, it is often appropriate for that individual to serve until the major changes required by the merger have been completed. This will provide the new leader to assume the role without animosity of those who may have been adversely impacted by one or more necessary decisions implemented during the merger.
- It is critical during this early phase to give significant attention to building a sense of community and common purpose. A creative leader will effectively use communications, social events, seminars and other tools available to facilitate a healthy unit.

## *Always Look to the Future*

- Mergers are difficult and often provoke a desire for the “good old days.” Once accomplished, it is never desirable to undo a merger.
- Inevitably some decisions made during the merger planning process may turn out to have been wrong. Both the leadership and faculty should be willing to acknowledge that and take actions necessary to correct mistakes.
- Find ways to honor the past – some have found publishing a history of accomplishments of the previous departments to be salutatory.





- If the leader of the merged unit is from either of the former units it is critical that the phrase, “this is how we used to do it” is never uttered.

It is worth noting that savings anticipated from mergers are generally lower than forecast and take longer to manifest. If individuals lose their jobs in the process of the merger and streamlining it is important to help them and continue to foster cooperation. The more efforts are made to help them secure other positions and the more they are treated with dignity and respect, the more healthy the new unit’s culture will be.

Significant efforts to include all stakeholders in the newly merged entity are a good investment—how can alums of the “old” departments be incorporated into ongoing activities? If the newly merged unit can, for example, seek out and honor graduates of previous entities on a relatively equal footing, acknowledging their ties and linking to the future, that can foster an environment conducive to productivity and growth.

