Leading Change with Faculty in Higher Education Institution Mergers

Dr. Christopher Hartig

College of Business, Western Governors University, Salt Lake City, Utah, USA

*Correspondence: Dr. Christopher Hartig, Email: chris.hartig@wgu.edu

ABSTRACT: Higher education institution administration must identify if there is a need to engage in an academic merger and how to effectively communicate with faculty and incorporate them during the change process. Faculty members in higher education institutions are essential to execute the phases of academic mergers and should be involved throughout the merger process. A qualitative case study of 12 faculty members from 12 different higher education institutions provides faculty perceptions and engagement in higher education institution mergers. The qualitative research data from faculty used in this paper discuss the emergent themes and recommended practices: 1) communication for buy-in, 2) planning for success, and 3) the emotions of disruption.

Keywords: Change management, Merger, Organizational leadership, Change model, Higher education, Faculty, Administration

1. INTRODUCTION

Academic mergers in higher education have developed into a survival plan of sustainability for some educational institutions. The budget expenses of public and private higher education institutions are increasing at nearly twice the rate of increased revenues [1]. The short-term and long-term impact of COVID-19 is still uncertain; however, the fall 2020 student enrollment shows a reduction of 10% to 30% at higher education institutions [2]. Higher education students are not matriculating as expected due to the uncertainty from the current pandemic. This current academic environment in higher education requires the administration to understand when an academic merger is necessary for survival and how to prepare and adapt for the merger process. Additional challenges to operation revenues will likely drive other higher education institutions towards academic mergers. The organizational impact of a merger is seen on all levels of the higher education institutions involved, and administration must understand how to lead the change initiative of an academic merger effectively [3]. The majority of change initiatives fail due to a lack of communicating the need for change with key stakeholders and reinforcing the desired results [4].

2. TYPES OF ACADEMIC MERGERS

Mergers of higher education institutions have been classified in similar categories to business organizations to understand objectives and organizational development better. The types of academic mergers are defined by the goals and the higher education institutions involved [5]. These categories of academic mergers are defined below:

Single-sector and cross-sector mergers: Higher education institutions that have comparable structures like private liberal arts colleges would be described as single-sector mergers. A cross-sector merger has less similarity in the type of institutions and academic programs offered than single-sector mergers. The level of familiarity in organizational structure and resources of merging academic institutions impacts the success of a merger [5].

Vertical and horizontal mergers: A vertical merger example would be between two institutions that offer different degree programs. Vertical mergers are a way to grow and scale quickly into a new program through the partnership of the merging higher education institution [6]. Horizontal mergers of two institutions with familiarity in programs and structure are less complex; however, the program and staffing duplications often lead to drastic downsizing of employees after the merger process [7].

Conglomerate mergers: An unrelated institution or foreign investment is an example of a conglomerate merger or acquisition. Conglomerate mergers involve institutions in unconnected industries often and provide potential undiscovered markets for the organizations [8].

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The higher education arena has increased competition for student enrollment and created operational challenges with falling revenues. Drastic change initiatives like academic mergers are becoming more frequent as a necessary survival method [1, 6]. Since 2016, there have been over 60 colleges and universities that have either closed operations or merged with another higher education institution. Enrollment declines and a lack of stability in operations will likely continue to contribute to an increase in mergers for higher education institutions [9]. Change leaders in higher education institutions

must collaborate with faculty stakeholders towards a change plan to promote the success of an academic merger [4]. The internal faculty members drive the implementation of a merger of higher education institutions. This case study provided some strategies for administrators to collaborate with faculty to navigate a successful academic merger.

The business industry has used mergers and acquisitions as opportunities to increase market share and financial outcomes for over a century. These corporate leaders of acquisitions follow proven methods and models to guide merger success. Academic mergers in higher education have only been prevalent since the 1970s; however, there are several characteristics of academic mergers that can apply proven practices in leading change from business industry experiences [10]. Identifying the need for a merger and having a roadmap for working with faculty will promote the sustainable merger [1]. Change models identify key stakeholders to implement the merger initiatives and provide methods to communicate the change vision for buy-in of the merger process [4, 11]

4. RESEARCH METHODS

This paper is based on a qualitative case study of 12 faculty perspectives on mergers of 12 colleges and universities involved in a higher education institution merger within the previous ten years. The case study utilized a qualitative interview design to gather an in-depth detail of responses from faculty experiences during a merger. The interviews provided insight into the change strategies during the merger and how faculties were incorporated into the process [12]. The research participants' demographics are shown in Table 1.

Interview Participant	Role/Position	Institution Type	Experience in Years
P1	Faculty	Tier 1 University	23
P2	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	Private University	3
P3	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	International	4
P4	Faculty	Online, For-Profit	2
P5	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	International	5
P6	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	Online, Non-Profit	3
P7	Faculty	Private University	6
P8	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	Online, Non-Profit	2
P9	Faculty	Private	16
P10	Faculty	Private, 2-Year	10
P11	Faculty with Some Administrative Duties	Private University	9
P12	Faculty	Private, For-Profit	9

Table 1: Research Participants' Demographics.

The case study of faculty perspectives of higher education mergers was guided by three research questions to learn how faculty participated in an academic merger of higher education institutions [12]. The research questions are as follows:

RQ1: What are the methods and strategies to incorporate faculty into the merger process?

RQ2: How does faculty engage and participate in the consolidation of the two academic institutions?

RQ3: What are the perceptions and feelings towards the merger from faculty members?

5. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Faculty members are key stakeholders in academic mergers and including them in the planning and implementation process promotes a successful merger [7]. The study results related to the three research questions provided findings in how the faculty stakeholders were incorporated and participated in the academic merger. Themes emerged from the research data framed by the research questions of Communication for Buy-in, Planning for Success, and the Emotions of Disruption [12]. Table 2 presents the emergent themes and implications developed from the case study.

RQ #	Implications	Associated Research Theme
RQ1	Communication Impacts Faculty Perceptions Transparency Builds Trust	Communication for Buy-in
RQ2	Include Faculty in Merger Plan Adopt a Change Model	Planning for Success
RQ3	Understanding the Emotional Impact Show Added Value Faculty Experiences Provide Varied Acceptance	The Emotions of Disruption

Table 2: RQ Implications and Associated Research Themes.

RQ1. What are the methods and strategies to incorporate faculty into the merger process? This first research question showed the perceptions faculty members felt in how they were included in the academic merger. Communication from administration with faculty regarding the merger influenced the level of buy-in from faculty towards change. One participant shared that the university's division and friction occurred because of intentionally vague communication about the merger. Participant 2 stated, "Communication is paramount to any successful business endeavor. I believe a lack of communication is responsible for many of the issues the university currently experiences." Nearly 83% of the faculty participants described how unclear communication created an overall negative perception of the merger. A lack of trust from faculty towards administration was shown by 58% of the faculty participants who believed they were included in the merger plan [12].

RQ2. How does faculty engage and participate in the consolidation of the two academic institutions? The merger strategies and processes that faculty incorporated were learned from the second research question. Developing a successful change plan for a merger includes involving critical stakeholders [13]. The faculty responses ranged from a feeling of being included in each stage of the merger to being completely uninformed during the merger process. The five research participants that shared transparent communication from administration during the merger stated they felt engaged in the merger. However, about 29% of the faculty participants without transparent communication shared a positive perception of the merger [12]. Participant 8 shared how collaboration with faculty and administration can assist in learning best practices in future change initiatives. Participant 8 responded,

Honestly, I don't think it could have been implemented much differently, given the quick nature of the process in trying to support displaced students from another institution. Through the process, though, we learned a few nuances about the processes which helped our institution should we ever be in the position to support another closing institution in the future. For instance, the IRB process is rigorous and unique to institutional sites; we prepared for an influx of unique and complicated situations to the best of our ability, but there is no way to appropriately prepare for that type of absorption, truthfully, in such a fast-paced situation. I think we did it quite well.

RQ3. What are the perceptions and feelings towards the merger from faculty members? This third research question described the emotions and resistance to change from faculty. Kotter [4] explained how a merger could fail without understanding the emotional resistance to the change plan. A participant described how their initial fears toward the merger went away over time as they were given time to process and continuous information on the merger status. Another participant explained that some colleagues were looking for employment at outside academic institutions without understanding what the merger meant for their future

employment [12]. When the change of a merger happened quickly without explanation, Participant 9 stated,

The company should have been much clearer about what was changing, what to expect, and how we would be impacted rather than just letting us know after the fact. We just knew it was happening, but we have only been told as pieces are implemented, with no advanced warning or discussion whatsoever on what to expect.

6. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

A decision to engage in an academic merger in higher education requires adapting to potential resistance and having a clear change plan to navigate the process [6]. Transparent communication with faculty on the reason for the change and adopting a change plan strategy can lead to a successful merger. Sharing the merger vision and including faculty throughout the process can overcome resistance to change from faculty. Faculties are the internal employees that impact an academic merger's implementation and success [13].

The suggested change models that are most effective are simple and clear in design [14]. The researcher proposes the change model while working with faculty with three simple processes: a) communication for buy-in, b) inclusion of faculty, and c) reinforce the desired change.

Communication for buy-in: The case study research participants described communication as a significant component of the faculty's buy-in to the merger [12]. Participant 2 felt that the division and problems in the university was from a lack of communication from leadership. Faculty may not support the merger without a clear understanding of the reasons behind the merger and why the change is needed [4, 6].

Inclusion of faculty stakeholders: A participant in the case study shared that an initial excitement towards the merger from faculty diminished as they started to feel left out of the merger planning. Another faculty member described how the merger happened very quickly and forced everyone to work together towards a common goal for displaced students [12]. When leadership adapts to the faculty input, trust is built in the institution [3]. Including faculty in the merger plans will benefit the execution of the merger and lower the potential friction towards the merger [7, 15].

Reinforce the desired change: The emotional impact of an academic merger's change can cause resistance to said change [4]. Sixty-seven percent of research participants expressed concern for themselves or other institutional stakeholders during the merger [12]. Participant 4 explained that there was a fear of the unknown about the merger until the benefits of the merger was shown to them. Positive reinforcement by

recognizing efforts and successes throughout the merger will support faculty navigation towards the merger goals [16].

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