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Successfully Navigating the Merger of Three Academic Departments into One

by

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Abstract

The paper focuses on the reasons that lead to the merger, the actual process of the merger, various change-management strategies, and the lessons learned. Participants were encouraged to actively engage with questions and discussions throughout the presentation of the material.

Keywords

Academic challenges, departmental culture, mergers, academic leadership, change management, reorganization

Background and Results

Many institutions of higher education are feeling the pressures to meet enrollment targets, with increased costs, and overall financial challenges while delivering quality education. Students and their families demand superior amenities, the latest technologies, and exceptional educational experiences, creating financial demands on institutions during times when opportunities to grow revenue are somewhat limited. Recently a mid-sized, private institution underwent a financial assessment and cost containment exercise that resulted in several changes in direct response to the financial pressures. One of several strategies developed by the dean who was directed to reduce costs was to merge three smaller departments into a single larger comprehensive unit. The new department was structured in a way that united several small, niche degree-granting programs. While combining the three diverse departments into a single unit, there were specific aspects of the process that led to the success of the merger. The process of the merger and the specifics that fostered success in a relatively short period of time were described by the dean and department chairperson.

As the institution was faced with the financial challenges, an external consultant performed a comprehensive evaluation of all the university functions. Operations in both the academic and administrative units of the university were evaluated with a focus on financial savings. In one college, it was determined that merging three departments into one would not only produce efficiencies, but provide opportunities for new and creative synergies. While this was one strategic response to the savings needs for this particular college, each college was given autonomy in their choices as to how to accomplish their required savings.

Specific to the merger, each of the individual departments was small with seven faculty or less, but all had related academic programs. Among the affected departments one small undergraduate program was disestablished. The full-time faculty dedicated to this program had resigned prior to the announcement of the disestablishment and an adjunct faculty was hired to teach out the program for one additional year. Administrative savings occurred by reducing three chairpersons to one, and reducing 2.8 FTE administrative assistants to 1.8 FTE administrative assistants. Additional faculty savings resulted following faculty retirements that were not replaced. Overall, the merger resulted in improved financial oversight of a single department with appropriately scaled operating and personnel budgets.

From the dean's perspective, the lessons learned during the process of the merger included (1) develop a focused and intimate working relationship with faculty governance and the leadership team, (2) minimize disruption to students, to the faculty, and to the staff, (3) ask every question from every angle, (4) communicate in a consistent and dependable way with opportunities for feedback from affected faculty and staff, and (5) take ownership of all decisions. The less tangible list, but equally important lessons learned, are to recognize the importance of transparent, inclusive decision-making, but when personnel are affected it is oftentimes difficult to implore those decisions on others. In addition, it is important, to consider the value of a larger, bolder decision than ones that only prove to demoralize the affected group, and to understand that the process through the merger will involve a necessary grieving period. The exercise also provided the opportunity to address inequities and disparities amongst faculty workload and salaries. Overall, maintaining a positive attitude and remaining focused on the goal were key to the successful process.

From the chairperson's perspective, two primary change management strategies were essential to understanding the steps in the process for the individuals affected. The chairperson who ultimately was identified to lead the new department utilized Kotter's 8 step process (1) and the Kubler-Ross model of grief processing (2). Together, these two models provided a clear path for the human reactions. The Kotter Model requires participation by people in order to become receptive to the changes. This is accomplished by establishing trust of the department chairperson, transparency, and teamwork. A clear end goal and a vision for the department were key for the chairperson to remain focused. The primary reasons for success in the merger were clear, consistent, and repetitive communication from the chairperson with the faculty and staff, a physical move to combine all three previous groups into a single office suite, and to understand what was of utmost importance to the faculty, active protection of each of the smaller academic program's individual identities. The chairperson was intentional about being approachable and accessible. Since the merger, the dean and department chairperson have actively worked to provide a culture of trust and respect among the faculty.

Many positive aspects of the new department that have emerged include enhanced awareness of the various programs offered in the college. The newly formed unit has experienced improved relationships and collaborations with other academic departments within the college as well as within the new department. As a result of the merger, the faculty

are working to improve the educational delivery with curricular redesign of each of the programs as they learn from a more diverse group of colleagues. Change is never easily accepted or executed. However, with lessons learned from this merger and the processes utilized, we anticipate that these examples are ones that other institutions and individuals can use as they face similar academic reorganization realities.

References

- (1) John P. Kotter (1995) *Leading Change: Why Transformation Efforts Fail*, Harvard Business Review, pages 59-67.
- (2) Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969) *On Death and Dying*. New York: Touchstone.