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Chairing Change: What You Should Know About University Consolidations

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Chairing Change: What You Should Know About University Consolidations

In this session, attendees will learn more about the role of the department chairperson during university consolidations. In higher education, consolidations, as the merger of two institutions, are becoming more and more common. However, most institutions are not well-prepared for the upheaval that can result when two institutions become as one. While consolidations can ultimately be beneficial for both colleges, the road to a unified operational entity can be fraught with difficulties. The goal of this presentation is to highlight areas where the chairperson takes on a significant role.

At the level of chairperson, being prepared to manage the sea change of a merger is critical. Whether that chair is from the acquiring institution or from the institution being acquired (target institution), their leadership is paramount during this very uncertain time. Specifically, this presentation will assert that, at a minimum, chairs from both sides of the consolidation must be able to manage the following:

Students: Consolidations can place students on shifting sands of change. Re-organizations of degree programs, discontinuation of duplicative programs, and cross-walks (teach-outs), give rise to myriad anxieties in student populations. This proposed presentation will provide chairs with action items to help students survive the process of consolidation.

Faculty and Staff: Both groups fear for their jobs, their supervisory lines, and even their duties/salaries during consolidation. In this area, chairs must strive for transparency while not fomenting levels of panic throughout the departmental ranks. Additionally, chairs must also prepare faculty for a radical change in culture, leadership, departmental makeup, and more. Guidance in this area will form a second part of this presentation.

Curriculum: Consolidations bring about the difficult realization that both institutions may have similar/identical programs. The question whose courses/curriculum will stay and whose will go is a thorny issue. Setting up processes through which both institutions can productively discuss curriculum including the change and approval workflow will be discussed here.

Operations: A consolidation means all levels of operations will change. Not only will chairs be learning multiple new systems and processes, but the people who support chairs—the administrative assistants and support staff—are in the same position. Understanding how to integrate with new people and processes will be discussed in this session.

Upper-level Administration: As a chairperson, lines of reporting can be in flux. As many upper-level administrators may see the writing on the wall and leave for greener pastures, the chairperson may lose the support of a much-familiar dean or provost and have to work with new/un-tested administrators. Important points to consider when dealing with new superiors will conclude this presentation.

Chairpersons attending this session will gain insight into key, top-level issues associated with university consolidations. They will takeaway ideas to discuss in their home institutions with the hope of managing a significant event in the life of a university.