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Advocating for your department during a school merger: The chair perspective

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Our school has been approached by various university/campus administrators to merge or restructure 5 times in the last 10 years; and each time the idea was soundly rejected. However, late in the 2016-2017 academic year we were approached by campus administrators for another restructuring conversation; yet unlike the prior approaches we learned that another school on campus requested the conversation. A recent failed Dean's search prompted their inquiry; ironically, we had an interim Dean in place ourselves. From the campus administration perspective, the timing for another conversation about restructuring/merging was ideal and we could not argue against that assertion. Starting July 1, 2018, we agreed to combine our efforts and establish a new school on campus.

To help understand the process, it is important to know that PETM had 3 departments (Kinesiology, Tourism Event and Sport Management, and Military Science) and the asking school (Health and Rehabilitation Sciences – HRS) consisted of 5 departments (Health Science, Nutrition and Dietetics, Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, and Physician Assistant). Clearly each school had either a strong focus on undergraduate degrees or professional school/graduate degrees. Finally, unlike many restructurings and academic mergers, each of the two schools were (are) financially sound with a healthy reserve. And while it may appear, at first blush, to be a natural fit for comprehensive academic programming, there were significant cultural differences revealed during the discussion and process of restructuring these two schools.

For this presentation, as Chair of the Department of Kinesiology, I will share my thoughts about the restructuring as chair of the largest department with the most institutional legacy; where we clearly prioritize undergraduate education. My unit is also the largest enrolled department that generates the highest credit hours per semester. The discussion will include how the 18 month long process revealed opportunities for advocacy on current practice, possibilities for collaborative efforts, and how to alleviate the fear of the unknown. Moreover, the axiom of "building the ship as we sail it" is particularly relevant as a few operational issues are left unresolved, currently. Finally, I will invite those with past or current experience with restructuring efforts to share their stories in hopes of supporting others who may face the necessary challenge of reconsidering your current structure.

As the then Chair of the Department of Tourism, Event, and Sport Management (TESM), I will discuss my observations in leading a department that may be considered an "outlier" for this new school. Six of the eight departments could find synergies under health-related research projects, courses, and initiatives. Yet, TESM needed to clearly articulate its value in the restructure and show it could be innovative in collaborating with colleagues in all departments. This requires a sense of patience - as at times our new colleagues misunderstood our faculty's focus – and due diligence with the TESM faculty to reassure them of their value throughout the process.