

## Coping with a College Combination: The First 100 Days

By Cheryl Achterberg

College combinations or mergers are becoming increasingly common at large universities due in part to budgetary constraints and the drive to manage universities more efficiently. Combining college budgets, cultures, historic practices, and policies is very hard work. Having taken up the challenge to lead the new College of Human Sciences this fall at Iowa State University, I have 10 observations or considerations to share after my first 100 days. They may help you to decide if you wish to take on a similar challenge or to give better support to those who lead a college combination:

*1. It is not for the faint of heart.*

Wolverton and Gmelch (2002) noted that a dean needs three characteristics to be successful: confidence, competence, and credibility. To this I would add one other characteristic—courage. There is no choice but to dive into the deep end of the pool for a college combination, and there is no ladder, no lifeguard, and no rescue once you do. You simply have to swim on your own. Hopefully, you will have a strong president and provost present and cheering for you on the sidelines.

*2. It is not for the inexperienced.* To be more direct, a college combination is not a good choice for a first-time, inexperienced dean. Faculty and staff will be nervous, more so than usual with a new leader. It helps a lot when new problems emerge to say (preferably out loud in front of the staff), “It’s okay. I’ve seen this before. We’ll get through this. I know how.”

*3. It is not for the superstitious.* There are more ghosts than you can imagine. I anticipated such, and they started appearing in week one, but I had no

idea how many, how big, and how serious they might be. In hindsight, I should not have been surprised. By definition, colleges that are combined have more troubles of various sorts than other colleges do, or else they would not have been combined.

*4. You will be friendless.* You might be mightily welcomed (I was), and lots of folks will be friendly, but this is not the time or place for making friends. There is too much to do, too fast, and there are too many people to meet and become acquainted with for developing friendships. It’s best to bring your support system with you or bide your time in building friendships for a few months.

*5. Do be prepared for surprises.* In addition to the ghosts, there will be other surprises, due dates, tasks, expectations, and command performances you won’t have known about or have had much time to prepare for. For me, the biggest surprise was learning one week into the job that a college strategic plan was due within a month. We negotiated for more time, but the pressure was intense. Like many surprises, however, it was a godsend because it gave both focus and urgency to our early activities working together.

*6. Do tend to the (extended) staff.* The temptation might be to focus on faculty, irate alumni, students, or higher administration, but the support staff are likely to be more directly and more seriously affected than any other constituent group in a college combination. They may also feel that they have been left out of the decision-making process leading up to the combination. Yet success as a dean will depend more on their cooperation than on anyone else’s. Try to keep that in mind during your first 100 days.

*7. Do pay attention to the symbolic frame of leadership,* particularly if there have been political issues leading up to the new combination (see Bolman and Deal, 1997). People want to see leadership in college combinations, and this is the best way for the most people to see it quickly. Write birthday cards, go to ceremonies and celebrations, and introduce new programs and awards personally. I was also reminded to walk through the halls, on different floors and along different routes, as often as possible so that more people caught sight of me more often.

*8. Do be extra vigilant with your health.* You will be stressed. You know this in advance, but you’ll feel it in the concrete once you hit the ground. By the end of my ninth week, I had lost eight pounds without trying and came down with a bad cold. That should not be surprising working seven days a week, often rising at 4:30 a.m. and with meetings and functions going until 10:00 p.m. every night. The point is you can get sick very fast. Take care of yourself; the outcome could be much worse than a cold.

*9. Don’t start in the fall,* if you can help it. The learning curve is vertical. Autumn makes it that much worse with dozens of obligatory events, football games, homecoming, faculty and staff award dinners, donor recognition dinners, etc. If there is a choice, do yourself a favor and start during any other season, even if this means a more awkward household move or leave-taking.

*10. Don’t beat yourself up.* Roll with the punches. You won’t be able to do it all, and you will probably leave a

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tion and if you do stay, for how long. There is consolation in having a faculty position to fall back on; however, depending on the circumstances, remaining at the institution can be difficult.

If you decide to accept a faculty position with the idea of moving on to a leadership position at another institution eventually, you need to maintain an active role within your institution and within external organizations.

Albertine recommends applying the skills and perspective you gained as an administrator to committee work you haven't done before. "Become active on committees or volunteer to do development work. Everybody loves that." This shows the administration that you take your citizenship seriously and helps to renew relationships with colleagues and the institution.

If you do not have tenure, resignation or termination gives the prospect of

able to explain why.

One way to maintain relevant activity in the absence of an official leadership position is to maintain relationships beyond your institution. "Professional networking beyond the institution is very important as you go through these changes. Your professional organization, if you've been active in it, will support you as you go through these changes."

Working as a consultant is another option that can keep you actively involved in academe as you search for a new position.

### **The "Killer Question"**

Perhaps the most important factor in landing a new leadership position is being prepared to answer what Albertine refers to as the "killer question": Why did you leave? "There's no single way to answer, obviously, but I can tell you if your response to that question is in any way unprofessional or negative, you're

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messy desk each night. If you can look at yourself in the mirror every night and say to your reflection, "I did the best I could today," that's enough.

I hope these reflections are helpful. My one-year observations will come in, well, another nine months!

#### **References**

Bolman, L.G., and Deal, T.E. *Reframing Organizations*. 2nd ed. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1997.

Wolverton, M., and Gmelch, W.H. *College Deans: Leading from Within*. Westport, CT: American Council of Education, Oryx Press, 2002. ▼