

Developing a new department culture: when programs merge

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Presentation Topic Theme: Issues and Trends in Higher Education

Presentation Type: Best Practice presentation

Target Audience: All department chairs

Learning objective(s) of the presentation: Participants will learn about actions to build and/or adjust department culture.

Abstract: This presentation will discuss some best practices that help transitioning cultures in merged or merging academic departments.

Description of session:

In spring 2016, Western Illinois University announced a planned reorganization of two academic programs. The Journalism program, previously housed in the English department, would be joining the Broadcasting department. It was the first of several moves by the university to provide some cost savings while improving efficiency. Similarly, in summer 2016, the university eliminated four major programs, including African American Studies, Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Women's Studies. Faculty from three of these programs (AAS, RS, and WS) were brought together under the existing Liberal Arts and Sciences program, although LAS had not previously housed any faculty.

With costs continuing to rise and state education dollars falling, some universities are moving towards similar cost reducing moves, looking especially at programs in which the number of majors drops below expected thresholds set by the university or state boards of higher education. When academic departments are forced to move, it brings a great deal of uncertainty among faculty and students. This presentation would discuss some best practices that help transitioning cultures;

1. Identify similarities. Usually the disciplines have been placed together due to some overlap in subjects matter or interests. You need to find the connections between the disciplines. You may consider revamping or making completely new mission statements and learning objectives that reflect the department's new identity.
2. Recognize your differences but don't let them keep you from moving forward. Avoid thinking, "that's the way it has been..." and help redirect faculty who may take this view, since some parts of higher education are very resistant to any type of change. While faculty input in a merger is important, especially in cases where the department head has little experience with a particular discipline, chairs can't allow the new department to get sidetracked by inertia.
3. Cast a vision. It may be necessary for department heads to cast their vision of a merged program and its potential, especially if faculty and/or students are having difficulty conceptualizing the new program and its potential. A compelling vision may spark the creative energy of people in the department and encourage them to work together.
4. Decide what stays and what goes. We had to deal with different approaches to committee membership and class schedules. Other considerations can involve office and classroom space, evaluating faculty for tenure, promotion and raises, recruitment and retention.
5. Encourage faculty. Establish a reward structure that is similar for all areas. Adversity can impact morale, production and reputation, so it will be important to get these areas moving in a positive direction. When hiring new faculty, make sure the person is committed to working in this new joint department.
6. Identify Curricular Issues. Consider having regular discussions about places that overlap or might have reasons for being together. For instance, intro courses or capstone courses might share goals or have the same mission. Discipline specific courses might benefit from having other perspectives. In the case of Broadcasting and Journalism, we are exploring how writing and law classes might benefit from having another perspective. In the case of Liberal Arts and Sciences, decisions had to be made about the manner of continuing to offer courses and minor programs from the eliminated majors.
7. Utilize Social Media Effectively. Social network sites have become a popular mode of distributing information about departments. A new department often means designing a new website and determining how information will be disseminated.
8. Get students involved in promoting the new department. Find ways to get faculty and students together: guest speakers, a department picture and meeting, or an awards banquet/dinner.