Commentary

To Merge Or Not To Merge: Observations And Recommendations

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I would like to focus on a development that may involve most ACE members, even if you have only three to five years left before you retire. It may relate to your pay check and your professional career.

What in the world am I talking about? I'm talking about the new kid on the block. What is his or her name?

He or she is a member of a new group on campus called, "Information Management," "Data Collection and Retrieval," or "Computer Management."

Some report to the director and dean and some to the Ag Econ department. They tend to be fast growing kids, and as they grow out of their present clothes, such as computers, microcomputers and minicomputers, they get high priority for new clothes because they are producing and storing volumes of impressive "soft clothes" that can be retrieved quicker than you can put paper in your typewriter.

By now, you probably think something is wrong here that Vacin is way out of date. That is what my 1-year-old son thinks. He's wrong. But if you think that introduction is dated, and might have been appropriate eight years ago—you are absolutely right.

How many of you remember Ovid Bay?

This is the introduction, Ovid Bay, then Director of Information and Communications for the Federal Extension Service, used to begin his acceptance speech for the ACE Professional Award at the 1983 ACE meeting in Madison.

How many of you were there?

His address was reprinted in ACE Quarterly. How many of you remember reading it?

Ovid went on to point out how the "fourth wave" for Agricultural Communication staffs is rolling in faster than most of us realize. He expressed concern that only a few of the most perceptive agricultural communicators would be riding the crest of that wave.

He urged ACE members to accept the fact that the university information/communications office of the future will not resemble the office of 1983, and that clientele will be as familiar with a computer as communicators were with a typewriter or a telephone back in 1983.

He outlined three possible scenarios for ACE members that night:

1. receiving secondary priority for funding and staffing,
2. receiving secondary roles in communications, and

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3. being merged with the computerized data collection processing staff on your campus without any participation. The chairperson of the merger, he said, may be oriented to computerized data collection and processing, may be the present head of the Extension Information/Communications unit, or neither of the above.

He pointed to Idaho, Purdue, and North Dakota, as examples of "fourth-wave mergers" that had occurred in the year prior to the 1983 national ACE convention.

Our friend, Ovid, was quite a prophet.

Between 1983 and 1989, three additional land-grant universities consolidated their agricultural communications and computer units— Pennsylvania State University, the University of Minnesota, and Washington State University. Two more universities consolidated in December, 1990—the University of Kentucky and West Virginia University. Similar consolidations at three additional universities—the University of Arizona, the University of Vermont and my own university, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln went into effect earlier this year. That brings the number of land-grant universities to 11 that have consolidated their agricultural communications and computer units since 1983.

Kansas State University has announced a similar consolidation to be implemented later on this year. Ohio State University is seriously considering consolidating its communications and computer units.

I'd like to bring you up to date on how those and other fourth-wave mergers have worked out. And, based on my research on those consolidations and my experiences at University of Nebraska-Lincoln, I'd like to offer recommendations for other land-grant universities that may be considering consolidating computer units with agricultural communications units.

Here's a brief rundown on what happened at each of the 11 universities, in chronological order:

Purdue—The staff of 18 handling the computerized FACTS program became administratively responsible to the head of the Agricultural Communications Services unit in 1981. Both staffs operated as independent units under a single head until 1988, when they were separated.

University of Idaho—An Agricultural Communications Center was formed in 1983 in a re-organization that merged the conventional agricultural communications staff with the small computer staff. Each person who served as head of the unit had another full-time job, starting with a district Extension supervisor. No one served more than one year. The units were separated several years later.

North Dakota State University— The conventional communications staff and the AGNET Services staff plus some other related staff were consolidated in 1983 to form a new unit now known as Extension Information. This has been the longest-lasting consolidation.

University of Minnesota—Five units—Communications, Computers, Non-credit Courses, the Secretarial Pool, and the Earl Brown Conference Center were consolidated in 1987 under the person who headed the computer unit. The communications and computer components restructured a second time about a year later. The unit continues to exist under its original name, the Educational Development System.

Pennsylvania State University— The communications and comput-

ing units were consolidated under the direction of the Computer Center director in 1987. The consolidation lasted about a year and a half, and then the units were separated.

Washington State University—The communications and computer units were consolidated in 1989 and a new department head was hired to provide leadership for the group. The new unit appears to be operating successfully.

University of Kentucky—The communications unit of seven and the computer unit of five were consolidated into a new unit known as Information and Education Technology in December, 1990. A former district Extension director is in charge of the operation.

West Virginia University—The agricultural computer unit was consolidated into the agricultural communications unit, known as the Information and Educational Technology Office, in December, 1990. The person who headed the communications unit emerged as leader of the combined unit.

University of Arizona—Budget cuts announced earlier this spring forced the elimination of eight communications and one computer staff position. The remaining six communicators and five computer people were consolidated into the Agricultural Education Department July 1, 1991.

University of Vermont—Initial merger discussions involved the Office of Information, the computer specialists, and the experiment station statisticians. Earlier this year, the information staff of eight and the three computer specialists became administratively responsible to a rural sociologist who already had a full-time job heading the Center for Rural Studies. Neither the communications or computer staff had input into the decision.

Kansas State University announced a merger involving its Extension Communications Department, Computer Systems Office, and Agricultural Experiment Station editor's office. The new unit also will be responsible for advising the agricultural journalism students and for teaching courses in magazine production and scientific writing. A national search will be conducted for a new department head.

The Ohio State University—An external review team recommended that the Extension Computing unit be merged into the Information and Applied Communications unit. Administration is discussing the merger, but no decisions have been made. However, the acting coordinator of the Extension Computer Management group is meeting weekly with the communications unit coordinators.

I saved the Nebraska story for last. About a year ago, our administrators decided to restructure our department by separating the academic functions—teaching technical writing and agricultural journalism and advising the agricultural journalism students—from the communication support functions—publications, news, broadcast, etc. The communications support functions were consolidated with the computer support group to form a new unit known as Communications and Computing Services.

As Head of the Department of Agricultural Communications, I had an opportunity to help plan the restructuring. But I felt we needed to do our homework first. So we conducted a study to gather information on the other universities' experiences. Our original study, completed in September, 1990, consisted of a questionnaire sent to a computer

person, a communications person, and an administrator who were involved in the consolidations at each of the first six universities. We received a 100 percent return. We followed up with telephone calls and personal visits with many of the respondents.

We updated the study last summer by contacting respondents at other universities involved in similar consolidations.

Based on the responses, I have developed a set of recommendations for universities that may be considering consolidating their communications and computer units. These recommendations would apply to consolidations involving other units as well.

1. Be open about the fact that reorganization is a possibility. Obtain meaningful input from both units and clients the new unit will serve. Not involving people in decisions that affect their lives is one of the quickest ways to lose trust and credibility. Do your homework. You may want to appoint a task force to evaluate the service provided by the units and make recommendations for the future.

2. If there are sound reasons for consolidating—if there are benefits to be derived, economies to be gained—if you are convinced a combined unit will provide better service than the individual units— then go ahead and restructure. But don't restructure just to be restructuring—just because it sounds like a good idea-and just because other universities or institutions are restructuring.

3. Consider the functions of the units involved. Are they service-oriented or product-oriented? Do they complement each other?

The closer the fit between the missions of the units, the better the chances the restructuring will succeed.

4. Consider the perceptions the people in the two units have of each other. Do they get along well? Have they been involved in joint projects? Do any of them already have joint appointments in the two units? Do they share a common work ethic?

5. If you decide to consolidate the units, articulate your rationale as clearly and objectively as possible. Let everyone involved know the reasons for the decision. In the long run, employees will appreciate informative candor more than any desire to protect them from the truth. Having a hidden agenda for restructuring units is another quick way to lose trust and credibility.

6. Spell out your vision for the future, and your expectations for the newly-restructured unit. This includes identifying specific problem areas with the individual units you hope the restructuring will help solve. It also includes identifying expected future outcomes. All of this will help employees understand the need— and potential benefits—of restructuring.

7. Once you make a decision to restructure the units, open communication becomes even more vital. Keep members of the units to be consolidated, and also others within the company, fully informed. Change can be traumatic. Some employees will accept the change more readily than others.

A change of this magnitude will spawn rumors within the units involved, and also company-wide. Dispel those rumors

by providing a steady flow of information about what's going on. Employees who will be affected will appreciate learning about developments from management first hand, rather than second or third hand from colleagues, or worse yet, from people outside their units.

8. Allow the people in the new unit to work together, don't force them to. Identify projects that could involve employees from each of the units. This will allow them to see how their skills complement each other, and get used to working together.

9. House all staff in the same building, on the same floor, if possible. It is important that employees have an opportunity to get to know each other and to build a new "we" mentality.

10. More than any other factor, your success will depend on hiring the "right" person to lead the group. The leader should have the following characteristics:
    a. Be a competent operations manager.
    b. Be able to work with people.
    c. Have a good working knowledge of all units involved in the consolidation.
    d. Be a visionary who can communicate that vision to employees and to management.
    e. Be able to walk on water.

11. Hire a full-time department head. Providing leadership for communications and computing functions and guiding the unit through a major reorganization is a major responsibility. Appointing a full-time leader will also demonstrate that you value the contributions the unit can make to your organization.

12. Use the same procedures for filling the department head position that you would for any other administrative position at your university. Conduct a national search. Give staff members in all units involved in the consolidation an opportunity to apply. Involve staff members at all levels in the selection process - not just upper or middle management.

How might I summarize my recommendations and make them applicable to administration trying to decide whether and how to restructure, or to a supervisor responsible for a newly-reorganized unit? I believe I could summarize my recommendations in three words—communicate, communicate, communicate.

At University of Nebraska-Lincoln, we spent a great deal of time planning how to restructure to accommodate new technology. A task force made up of representatives from both units worked hard to develop a new mission statement, structure, and staffing pattern for the unit. A smaller committee drew up the job description for the director.

The administration originally planned to conduct a nationwide search for the director. Then, when our budget was cut by $2.3 million last summer, they asked the associate vice-chancellor to serve as director for a two-year period.

Our new structure has been in place less than four months. But those of us in both the academic and communications support units feel there is a challenging and rewarding future ahead for us.

References

Bay, Ovid (1983). New Technology is Changing Conventional Information Staffs. *ACE Quarterly, 66*(4) 8-10.