



The Sum Is Greater Than Its Parts: Synergies in Advancement Through Higher Education Mergers

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PRESIDENTS CORNER

As college and university presidents spotlight and champion the areas of differentiation at their respective institutions, many are also navigating the myriad headwinds challenging their own institutions. A realistic assessment may include the consideration of mergers, partnerships, and affiliations as a means toward mission-continuity and/or accelerating growth initiatives and long-term financial sustainability. This article focuses on **Offices of Advancement** and addresses key considerations that can aid in the long-term success of partnerships or mergers, particularly if addressed early in the process.

Philanthropy can be a powerful driver of resources advancing institutional mission. Presidents can optimize the synergies inherent in higher education mergers by including Offices of Advancement and best practices early in partnership discussions. The synergies possible in advancement practices that can accelerate mission-execution might be: how can alignment, partnership and/or merger motivate and energize advancement officers and their staff?

The Advancement sector in higher education has and continues to evolve and transform. Donors today expect measurable returns on their contributions through concrete and observable metrics (i.e. “return on investment”). This requires defining initial goals at the time of “investment”; and similar to financial investments, institutions must demonstrate and quantify the “investment” performance with respect to the

predefined objectives. In turn, this requires goals to be agreed upon, articulated and quantified. Return on Investment is not necessarily measured by financial return; it can be also measured by investment in areas such as mission, program growth, institutional reputation, visibility, alumni participation, board commitment, and long-term strategic thinking. Think of this evolution as morphing from a **Return on Investment** to a **Return on Mission**.

The work of Offices of Advancement **must be both relational and strategic**. Advancement officers do not view their roles as transactional but rather building long-term relationships, listening to donors, and marrying the mission and vision of the donor with the institution. The most successful advancement practices connect a priority institutional project with a donor who has a personal and strategic connection

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with such opportunities. The advancement officer can then articulate and measure return on mission with quantifiable goals.

For example, recently, a private university created a new *College of Health & Community Well-Being* along with a new health facility. The primary goal was to recruit and graduate students from the region who would then serve in the most needed health professions in that region. The target student population was predominantly under-represented first-generation students with aspirations to become health professionals who have a desire to remain in the region post-graduation (the so called “brain-remain”). A highly successful regional Latino donor, with an extensive health background, felt a personal and professional calling to make the largest cash pledge in the history of the university to name the new *College of Health & Community Well-Being*. This is a prime example of listening to donor’s interest in the mission of the university and aligning his philanthropy objectives with the university’s mission. When two mission-resonant institutions merge, new opportunities materialize, providing donors on both sides opportunities to align their philanthropy objectives with new projects.

The Role of Presidents in Mergers Through the Lens of Advancement

As presidents consider the advancement activities through the lens of “return on investment” and

“return on mission”, they should consider connecting potential fundraising priorities and opportunities with philanthropists that may be connected to each of the merging institutions. These priorities and opportunities can be analyzed and restructured with quantifiable goals, objectives, and milestones, to help identify and customize projects for specific philanthropists that are part of each separate institution as well as the merged institutions. Advancement Offices become significantly more successful if projects are tailored and customized for specific philanthropists who have an interest in the missions of each and/or both institutions.

Mergers present a substantial opportunity for presidents to broaden the scope of advancement. These uncharted waters are critical for the future financial health of the merged institutions. Joint or cross-divisional colleges, departments, or programs can be created, funded, and named. Chairs and professorships for such programs can be named through fundraising. Synergistic programs may help the institution by growing in scale and financial strength. This is attractive to donors who want assurances of sustainability. New facilities can be built, reimaged, or renovated (and named) to support the expanded mission of the merged institution. These programs, positions, and facilities provide ample opportunity for fundraising from individuals, alumni, foundations, corporations, and the broader community.

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Additionally, many partnering institutions can reduce costs and achieve greater effectiveness to improve financial viability. It may be possible to think of two institutions with collaborating Advancement Offices to be greater than the sum of their parts. With proactive, integrated priority and goal setting (that may also include an assessment of operating systems and staffing redundancies with a clear understanding of separate and joint prospects and donors), it may be possible to reduce the expenses of the separate Advancement Offices, yet, have a greater return on their joint investment.

Another important consideration when merging or aligning two institutions is that of culture – the culture of the organization, its people, and of philanthropy. The cultures of each institution must be assessed and aligned to create an environment of gratitude, service, partnership, and accountability.

These opportunities should be considered, strategized, and quantified by both presidents when considering mergers. The most strategic presidents will include specific advancement goals in their budgets while seeking partners and negotiating the merger. As the courtship between the partnering institutions progresses, strategies that impact advancement successes should be developed to build upon the underlying goals of the merger. Ultimately, such strategies are a powerful tool to expand mission execution and provide a financial foundation for mergers.

The Role of VPs for Advancement in Mergers

When institutional presidents and Boards of Trustees agree that a merger may be in the best interest of both institutions, both presidents should bring the appropriate personnel into the conversation so that seamless integration of mirroring offices/divisions can identify the best path forward. The Offices of Advancement at both institutions should collaborate and align where possible.

The primary questions asked of Advancement Officers in consultation with their respective presidents may be:

- 1 How is the merger framed so that donors, volunteer leaders, and alumni are positively receptive?
- 2 What are the public relations and communications plans so that prior and future donors to each institution fully understand that their donations will be supported and honored?
- 3 How can some initiatives be common across both institutions so that donors' contributions will support the mutually beneficial initiative?
- 4 Where are cost savings for personnel, systems, and processing in the respective Advancement Offices to support the common efforts of both institutions?
- 5 Where can outside campaign and advancement counsel be a benefit to assisting both institutions rather than just one?
- 6 How can the VPs for Advancement in consultation with their respective presidents best educate their respective boards to see the donor, alumni, and financial benefits to both institutions?
- 7 How can current and future students understand the benefits to both institutions and become loyal, committed, and contributing donors and alumni to either and/or both institutions.

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Conclusion

As the field of philanthropy evolves in higher education, donors seek quantifiable goals and metrics to evaluate their “return on investment” and “return on mission.” Presidents should customize and connect opportunities for philanthropists with such goals in mind. Mergers can provide a significant opportunity to amplify mission-execution initiatives to expand institutional offerings and facilities. This framework presents presidents with a significant opportunity to broaden how they think about philanthropy and transform their institutions while creating a culture of philanthropy throughout the process.

Through the actions of mergers, alignments, and partnerships, VPs for advancement at the merged institutions have the opportunity to work collaboratively with their respective presidents (and each other) to navigate the perspectives and perceptions of alumni, donors, Boards of Trustees, faculty, staff, and external community leaders. Positioning the Advancement Offices and respective personnel to address the questions and concerns of these various constituent groups early in the process will lead to increased individual and institutional philanthropic investment, campus morale, and institutional alignment.



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