

College Consolidations and Mergers
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Greetings. My name is Elsa Núñez and I am the president of Eastern Connecticut State University. Today I would like to talk to you about the trend in higher education that has seen more colleges and universities merge or consolidate to survive in today's uncertain times.

Over the past few years, more states have turned to public university mergers as a strategy for addressing a set of structural issues impacting higher education. States that have merged separate colleges and universities into systems, or are looking to do so include Wisconsin, Pennsylvania, Vermont, Minnesota, Alaska, among others. More will follow.

Private colleges are certainly not immune to the social and economic challenges facing higher education. In New England, the closing of Mt. Ida College and the merger of Wheelock College and Boston University are two examples we are all familiar with. However, as a president of a public state university, I want to focus my remarks today on public state system mergers and consolidations.

There are three underlying trends that are forcing higher education institutions to seek innovative measures to survive. The first is **societal change**. Since 2010 and continuing through 2025, the nation's colleges and universities are projected to lose 28 percent of their student body due to lower birth rates and population shifts. A second overriding force is **financial**: state budgets have been unable to keep up with rising costs. State allocations to public institutions of higher learning are stagnant or declining. The third trend that higher education must confront is the **value proposition**. At a time when affording a college education has become increasingly difficult for many families, public confidence in the value of a college degree has declined. To provide students an affordable education that results in rewarding careers requires new thinking in today's world.

The challenge for university presidents and state system offices is to take the interests of **all stakeholders** into account when initiating mergers and consolidations. When legislators and other bureaucrats lead mergers, without campus administrators and faculty at the table, they tend to focus on finances and the use of technology to achieve efficiencies.

The quality of education and the impact on students is not given as much attention. And yet it is the concerns of students and faculty about academic quality, student outcomes, faculty support, and educational resources that accrediting agencies focus on. How can policymakers and educators work together to ensure successful mergers? I would like to suggest two key elements of a successful merger framework:

- Transparency and stakeholder inclusion are key — from day one.
- Any plan to merge institutions and systems must be honest about the limitations of mergers and the inevitable losses that some stakeholders will face.

Let me share an example of a consolidation that has had bumps in the road that speak to the issue of transparency and stakeholder inclusion. **The Pennsylvania University System voted in July 2021 to merge six universities in the system into two; one in the western part of the state and one in the east.** The three-year plan will be finalized in August 2024. Several formal groups have been created to object to the process. One of them — Save Our State Schools — questioned the level of communications that took place over the past year during public comment, a time when students were not on campuses. Instead of in-person focus groups, the state system used virtual town halls held during weekday work hours to hear

from students and employees, and most board members were not present. There are lessons to be learned here.

Two mergers that I know more about demonstrate the value of stakeholder involvement. First of all, let me speak to my own state of Connecticut. For the past three years, Connecticut has been preparing to consolidate the 12 community colleges into one single Connecticut Community College. The process has not been without challenges. To the credit of our Board and our System Office staff, they have made adjustments to the plan, and continue to work within a collaborative framework to accomplish the goals of the merger.

Initially the consolidation was predicted to save the state 23 million dollars by centralizing services and streamlining management staff. Early discussions focused on these savings and how best to unify systems ranging from human resources to facilities, information technology, and procurement. The plan was then presented to the New England Commission on Higher Education. Their response was that more attention needed to be devoted to the impact on students and ensuring academic quality at the 12 community colleges.

Our Board of Regents and System Office have worked hard to respond to the issues that matter to our accrediting agency — student learning outcomes; curriculum and academic programs; faculty support; and other student-centric issues. The cost savings projections have been lowered to reflect a more gradual implementation plan. Other adjustments, based on feedback from faculty, individual campuses, and other stakeholders, have been made. These include retention of academic department chairs on the campuses and a realignment of the three regions that will serve as the structure the 12 colleges.

A variety of committees and work groups composed of faculty, administrators, and students are working on a common General Education Curriculum, improved transfer options for students and Career Pathways. Other stakeholders involved in these discussions include faculty senates, academic administrators, and the Board's Faculty Advisory Committee.

This commitment to including faculty, students and other groups most impacted by the consolidation plan has been well received. So has the willingness of the Board and the System Office to respond to feedback by making key changes in the plan. Connecticut has more to do in the next two years before the consolidation is fully implemented. Making the process more transparent and more collaborative has clearly helped move the transition forward.

Dannel Malloy, former governor of the state of Connecticut, is now the chancellor of the State of Maine University System. In Maine's consolidation efforts, Chancellor Malloy has the benefit of merging our state universities and community colleges in Connecticut a decade ago. Having spent several years of my career in the Maine System as the Vice Chancellor for Academic and Student Affairs, I am especially interested in how my colleagues in Maine are doing.

Maine's approach has been to gain systemwide accreditation. Historically the University of Maine's seven campuses and Law School have each achieved their own accreditation. In July 2020, the New England Commission on Higher Education granted the University of Maine System "unified accreditation," followed by an initial site visit in spring 2021. The System is currently preparing a Self-Study in preparation for a fall 2022 site visit, in keeping with the commission's "Substantive Change" requirements.

In working for several years on its unification plans, the Maine System has chosen a comprehensive, transparent path to achieving more efficient operations while preserving educational quality and access. In

addition to creating many study groups, committees and other means to ensure collaboration, the entire process has been documented and transparently presented on the System's website for all to see.

This planned approach to Unified Accreditation can provide significant benefits to Maine's various stakeholder groups. For instance, a system-wide approach to academics, where innovative pedagogy supports expanded course offerings, necessitates a faculty-led approach to curricular reform. Central to this process is the preservation of faculty academic freedom and shared governance. This has been reaffirmed by Guiding Principle 2 of the System's Unification Plan.

I learned many years ago that avoiding conflict resolves nothing. In the case of creating centralized systems of public higher education, the conflict runs the gamut from the loss of local identity and autonomy to lost prestige and position, even lost jobs. When state and institutional leaders sit at the table to plan for state mergers, they must be unflinchingly candid about the limitations and downside of their plans.

People in these roles tend to focus on the positive — cost savings, efficiencies, use of technology. Most of those benefits fall short of the projections. But more importantly, focusing on the upside wastes time that should be devoted to managing the downside. People from the groups that are likely to be hurt the most must be at the negotiating table — faculty, students, administrators, local officials when appropriate.

When you combine institutions or functions, someone is going to lose power, prestige, position, and privilege. Leadership roles will be lost. Campuses may be forced to close. Students may have to travel further or otherwise adjust their education. Institutional reputations can be negatively impacted. How can these issues be resolved or accommodated if you don't discuss them with the people most effected? How can you make sure that enrollment and the quality of the education we provide students is not negatively impacted?

I have described how Connecticut and Maine have attempted to answer these questions by working closely with the New England Commission on Higher Education to ensure that the substantive change of institutional mergers and systems creation meet the standards of accreditation.

I remember when I was the Dean of the Faculty at the College of Staten Island. Staten Island Community College had merged with Richmond College in 1976 without adequate discussion with the faculty beforehand. It was still a bone of contention ten years later, discussed daily in the halls as if the merger had taken place only the year before. People want to be involved in decisions impacting their lives. It's that simple.

Managing the intricacies of university system mergers to account for the concerns of all stakeholders yields better results. Accrediting agencies are also more likely to support these substantive changes. Thank you for taking time to hear my thoughts on this important issue!