

The Last Months: The Decision to Close Barat and the Lessons to Learn

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The decision to close the newly merged college came after months of sometimes highly publicized events that involved faculty, students, staff, alumni, and community members. Many of these were collegial, peaceful protests, but in the end they were unsuccessful. In the summer of 2003, the EVP for Academic Affairs resigned. Although he had committed DePaul to the acquisition of Barat two years before without widespread support from the University's constituencies, the new administration decided almost immediately that it would not retain Barat.

Their predisposition to close the campus was predicated on a particular assessment of the finances and future of the school. The dominant narrative was developed by DePaul's administration and the Barat Task Force. The latter was organized by the administration in the fall of 2003 and consisted of DePaul administrators predisposed to close the Barat campus. Unfortunately, the Task Force reached its conclusions without fully considering the alternative proposals from the Barat community.

1. Recruitment Failures

The university neglected to develop and execute a coherent recruitment strategy for Barat. It also overlooked the "Next Generation" plan Barat had developed for increasing enrollment. That plan was to serve the growing immigrant population in Lake County and would have enhanced Barat's financial situation.

2. Renovation Costs

Much of the argument turned on the rehabbing undertaken by DePaul to bring historic Old Main up to code and to the university's plant standards. Barat's operating budget accounted for only 2.5% of DePaul's annual budget, but the money spent for renovation and the actual figures for past and future renovation were a matter of dispute throughout this debate — was exaggerated. DePaul projected spending \$400 million over ten years to renovate all of the University's infrastructure. Barat's portion would amount to a small fraction of this total. This was never put into perspective. Barat was portrayed as representing irreparable harm to DePaul's financial health.

3. Operating Costs

One of the attractions of Barat was that it was a small liberal arts suburban campus where students received individual attention. Now the ratio of faculty to students was depicted as cost-inefficient. The dominant culture of the controlling institution after the merger determined the interpretation of these facts. Further frustration arose from a series of blocked efforts to convey the "other side of the story" and to show that adhering to "one side of the story" would undermine a fully-informed choice. This resulted in a misguided and potentially harmful decision for the university and others. Many members of the Board never visited the campus. The Barat attitude was that dialogue and a full hearing of factors and alternatives could cultivate a collegial "win-win" solution for DePaul and Barat.

Among the blocked efforts were Barat's attempts 1) to use the media to inform the wider public, including alumni, and gain a fair hearing from the DePaul Board and administration, 2) to present 400 letters (from Barat advocates, including alumni, students, faculty, administrators, and community leaders) to the Board prior to the critical board meeting, 3) to contact the Board by phone or in meetings to present Barat's side, and even such extreme measures as 4) ordering Barat staff not to participate in efforts to save the college. Barat advocates were consistently unable to communicate with the constituencies of the University in order to give input into the Board's deliberations and to undermine institutional antagonism through creative and persistent means.

Ultimately, DePaul's Board and administration failed to solicit faculty opinion prior to the merger. Before the Board made its final decision to close Barat, it sent the question to the Faculty Council. Despite the Council's majority vote (14-11) to retain Barat, the Board chose to ignore the recommendation of faculty, in essence circumventing shared governance a second time.

And finally, in addition to the lost jobs by some faculty and most staff, the decision had dire consequences for students. Students suffered, no matter how well intentioned the efforts of faculty and

administrators. Some students got caught in the middle, unable to complete their programs at the campus of their choice and were forced to transfer. Place-bound students were particularly disadvantaged. Other students, not willing to embrace a vastly different environment, refused to transfer to another campus of the university. In the end, students in a culture of community, especially in a small environment, experienced a bitter disappointment at the deconstruction of their academic home.