

The Merger Myth: The Case of Barat/DePaul

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What faculty need to know

Although every faculty member of little, struggling Barat College in Lake Forest, Illinois knew that the so-called merger with large, affluent DePaul University of Chicago was in reality an acquisition, the language used throughout the process was consistently “merger” and “alliance.”

The faculty of DePaul University was never informed of the merger until after the fact, and even worse, Barat’s faculty was told repeatedly by their administrators that no such negotiation was in progress. The specific deal struck had little chance of being received enthusiastically by either group, for even those from the failing college realized that the plan (to set up a tiny interdisciplinary liberal arts college in competition with its giant counterpart in Lincoln Park) had disastrous deficiencies, especially in light of half-hearted recruitment efforts. Nevertheless, both faculties, for the most part, played along until the end, when the Board of Trustees of DePaul University decided three years after the merger to close Barat Campus, thus in effect closing the 100-year-old college at the first moment legally possible. Significantly, this closure was decided on despite the votes by both faculties to retain the newly acquired Barat Campus.

The failure of this merger provides the costly lesson that faculty governance must be brought into this kind of decision from the beginning. Other serious dangers exist. If a merger is under discussion:

1. Faculty should carefully examine promises of continued employment.

DePaul pledged, according to the merger agreement not accessible to faculty, to honor tenure and later, after the Board’s decision, to retain all tenured and tenure-track professors. Nothing was offered to those faculty on non-tenure-track lines, some of whom had taught at the institution for more than a decade. Further, in part perhaps an effort to assuage disgruntled DePaul faculty who were left out of the merger decision, the administration vowed not to “force” Barat faculty onto any DePaul department once Barat closed. Thus the Barat faculty were so far from “merged” that they were required to apply and interview for jobs at DePaul. This happened in many cases even after they complied by teaching the DePaul prescribed curriculum. Although the total number of Barat faculty was small, especially in light of DePaul’s numbers (26 tenured and tenure-track, five non-tenure track, as compared to approximately 750 full-time faculty at DePaul), a third of the tenure/tenure-track group was not accepted into their respective departments. These mostly tenured professors have been given an option to work “at large” in the University, not affiliated to any particular program—a job description with serious professional drawbacks. Another option is a one-year salary buy-out for both the tenure-track and tenured professors. Appeals and legal actions are now pending.

2. Faculty should carefully examine academic re-organizations resulting from a merger.

Barat was set up as an “autonomous” college within the DePaul, but the old curriculum was for the most part deleted. From the outset, professors were told that they needed to invent a curriculum that would not duplicate existing DePaul programs, and to reinvent themselves as professors not of their traditional disciplines, but of interdisciplinary studies, necessitating the creation of an entirely new range of courses. The old identity of the college—the part dependent upon the curriculum—was lost. Eventually, disciplinary majors from the university were offered at Barat under the purview of other colleges of the University. This complicated system, not without problems, lasted for only a short time. During one year, some professors were teaching both semester and quarter courses simultaneously as the college moved to the quarter system. The faculty was offered no support or released time to redesign and adapt their courses to the quarter calendar. Faculty careers were jeopardized by administrative directives that threatened the intellectual and professional identity of the professors. The re-organization at times even encouraged faculty to abandon their disciplines and areas of expertise.

3. Faculty should examine recruitment promises up front and hold the new institution to such promises.

Barat was told that its enrollment would increase immediately due to the large recruitment machine of DePaul, and the new goal would be to increase the number of students from 1000 to 2500. But rather than seeking students who wished to attend a small, suburban, historic campus, one of the first moves was to shift DePaul's high-risk students to the Barat Campus with the result that in its first year, the College had well over 50% of its new students at high risk. With a lack of available housing in Lincoln Park, the major campus of the University, the students who could not get housing there were forced to attend Barat. Little to nothing was done to recruit the non-traditional-age students who have been a major component of the population. Nor were those who graduated from the local community colleges, a staple of the student population for years, pursued. Faculty efforts to encourage more productive recruitment policies were ignored and discouraged.

4. Faculty should be acutely aware of, and work to forestall, any policies that pit faculty of one institution against the other.

Because of the history of failed shared governance, the DePaul faculty was suspicious of the merger and also the faculty of Barat. An unstated perception was that financial insufficiency somehow meant academic insufficiency—that poor equals bad. Despite the efforts of the DePaul AAUP chapter and some faculty of good conscience in that university, Barat College and its faculty were consistently characterized as inferior. Women's institutions in particular (with only a few exceptions) have lacked the endowment to remain independent. Barat, a small woman's college until 1982, is no exception.

5. Faculty of each institution (especially the smaller party) should monitor how in negotiations its administration represents its faculty, students, and curriculum.

Administrators eager to solve financial problems can easily neglect faculty interests. Without strong leadership, the rights and priorities of the smaller institution can be subordinated to the larger institution if its negotiating administrators are not capable of crafting a plan that protects the integrity of the smaller college. Not only faculty rights are at issue, but things as material as space and resource allocation can be negotiated away.

6. Conclusion: The faculty needs legal representation before completing a merger.