

A Response to “A Description of Merger Applied to the Montana State University Context”

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AS Professor Coffman's analysis clearly notes, there are both strong negative and positive perceptions and impacts that have arisen and continue to arise when one attempts to look carefully at the present and future of the Montana University System; the Montana State University System; and the outcomes, present and future, of reorganization, restructuring, and affiliation/merger/consolidation within and across those systems.

The fears and concerns noted by Professor Coffman, however real or imagined, accurate or inaccurate, and positive or negative they may be, and the extent to which they are predetermined or self-fulfilling and prophetic in nature are well founded. His description of the merger as it continues to be experienced at Montana State University-Billings is somewhat narrow in focus and perhaps overly reflective of the faculty and faculty association perspectives rather than upon a set of reflections more representative of broader constituents across the University.

In the first section of his manuscript, Dr. Coffman provides an objective and quite accurate review and description of “merger” in the context of the Montana State University System. There appears to be somewhat of a shortfall in the sub-text presentation covering “Why Merge.” The “Why Merge” analysis fails to address the rapid and significant changes in public higher education already evident in the universities and systems across the region and nation.

The Merging section reflects quite accurately on key issues from the perspective of students, parents, staff, taxpayers, alumni, and the general public. While I am somewhat in agreement with the “dark side” perspective, there is a lack of identification of issues that expose the reader to the “brighter side” and, hopefully, more positive perspectives on merger. These points might have addressed the potential for curricular improvements; the advantages of resource sharing; the potential for expansion of programmatic offerings made possible through affiliation and merger; and the improved ability of merged/affiliated institutions to work together to address institutional and system issues by cooperation, collaboration, and partnership rather than by pure competition and protection. The fact that each issue identified in this section poses the “possibility and reality of negativity” in each issue also has a converse side that offers the equal possibility and reality of positive change, new direction, improvement, and a different perspective. Thus, it is not necessarily the case that mergers produce more bureaucratic complexity, more inter-institutional competitiveness, and have largely negative impacts upon faculty, curricula, and functionality.

The manuscript section focused upon the Eastern Montana College-Montana State University merger presents many excellent insights into the merger/affiliation process that were and continue to be real experiences and perceptions, accurate or inaccurate, of an institution being “forced” into the merger/affiliation. Many of the so named destructive and

constructive potentials are real but so are many imagined, some likely, some less than likely, and some improbable but not impossible, and others highly improbable! In the rapidly changing higher education landscape of today and tomorrow, to view change (merger/affiliation) as a largely negative process and experience can only impede or restrict our combined abilities to focus upon the "bright side" and the opportunities produced by such changes and perhaps benefit accordingly. To focus upon the fears associated with lump-sum funding. A largely negative approach results in the attitudes described, when the author states, "over the past nine months few positive outcomes have been forthcoming and the faculty mood has become increasingly pessimistic." This self-fulfilling prophecy seems most likely when seen from a faculty perspective that encourages them to see what they knew they would see from the very beginning.

The merger/affiliation process appears to have produced modes, positive shifts in public perceptions regarding the Montana University System. Long standing public criticisms of the University System which have included many negative perceptions centered upon unnecessary and unwanted and misunderstood competition between units, including competition for dollars and students; too many 4-year schools/units for such a small statewide population; barriers created by the units which impede student transfer between units and result in unnecessary costs and time lost in repeating courses already completed elsewhere; and an unnecessary and wasteful duplication of programs and services across the units of the system. Legislators and taxpayers alike see the mergers as progress toward the resolution of these issues. Whether real or imagined, the perception is that things are changing, changing for the better and that the mergers have provided a mechanism for even greater change and improvement.

Professor Coffman's analysis of the merger fails to adequately address the Board of Regent's and Commissioner's agenda for the merger process as a means of preparing the University System for the rapidly changing nature of public higher education, dramatic change already seen and felt in Montana, the Northwest, and across the nation. The changes are many and they are unfolding rapidly. The changes include: a changing pattern of funding for public higher education (reduced levels of state support and increased reliance on revenues from students via dramatic increases in tuition and fees); huge reductions in federal support for higher education; greater demands for accountability; increasing competition from providers outside the state and region; increasing enrollments driven by larger high school graduating classes; and the underutilization of 2-year educational programs, including the Colleges of Technology, and the community colleges.

Another wild card in the merger scenario centers on the very existence and/or continuation of the Board of Regents and the Office of the Commissioner of Higher Education. In the 1995 legislative session, the legislature passed by a very narrow margin (one vote) HB 229, a bill that will take to a public vote in November, 1996, the continuation or demise of the Board of Regents and the Commissioner's Office will be replaced by a state agency created by the Governor. If passed, the actual effective date of the changeover is 2001, which could leave the University System as a rudderless ship directed by "lame ducks" during a most critical period in the reorganization and restructuring (merger) of the University System.

Perhaps, the most significant, unfilled promise of the merger process has been the University System's failure to demonstrate to the taxpayers, legislators, and the public at large, significant savings. Although the Regents and the Commissioner, early on in the merger/affiliation process, declared any savings would be in the form of greater efficiencies, a reduction in the rate at which costs would increase, and greater cost controls and price stability, and more accountability, the public expectation of large real dollar savings has not and probably will never be satisfied.

One undiscussed benefit of the University System merger process has been a clear and

more concentrated effort by the Regents and Commissioner to provide better and more complete information about the University System to all interested parties, legislators, taxpayers, students, faculty, administrators, and the public at large. Information about revenues and expenditures, tuition and fees, student enrollments, management plans for units and the system, etc. For the first time in recent history of the University System, the Regents and the Commissioner's Office have committed to sharing of information about the University System and providing the opportunity for public reaction and input into the process.

The Regents and the Commissioner have also entered into a "compact" with the Governor to encourage a much closer and more involved relationship between the Regents, the Commissioner's Office, and the Governor's Office, a new relationship that clearly acknowledges and accepts the role of the Governor's Office in changing the direction of the University System. Clearly, there is ample reason for concern and pessimism about the future of Higher Education in Montana. There is also good reason for optimism and excitement about the future. The challenges are many and more seem to emerge with each passing week or month. There remains little evidence that taxpayers, legislators, and the public are "satisfied" with the changing tide and the directions taken. State support and taxpayer support for public higher education continues to be pitted against other agendas and priorities, including tax reductions, personal safety, welfare, corrections, medicare, health care issues, and K-12 education, issues beyond the transition of the University System. The challenges presented are and will be accompanied by opportunity. Merger must be viewed as an opportunity if we are to succeed in our mission of public higher education.

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