


Chapter 13

An Origin Story: A Case Study in Blending Programs, Building Trust, and Merging Social Work Departments

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ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a case study of the merger between the Social Work programs at the College of Saint Rose and SUNY Plattsburgh following the former's unexpected closure in 2023. What began as a crisis became a values-driven adoption process grounded in social work ethics, relational trust, and collaborative leadership. Faculty and administrators from both institutions worked swiftly to preserve community, ensure continuity for students, and expand educational access. Framed

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3373-2063-2.ch013

as a “blended family” rather than a transactional merger, the chapter details the emotional, structural, and strategic aspects of the transition. It highlights the role of transparency, care, and collective decision-making in managing grief, sustaining professional identity, and building a new departmental culture. Lessons learned offer a potential model for institutions navigating closure or transformation, emphasizing the power of shared purpose and human connection.

INTRODUCTION

On November 30, 2023, the local news reported that the Board of Trustees for the College of Saint Rose had voted to close the college at the end of the Spring 2024 semester. A little over 90 minutes later the college President sent a communication to the students, staff and faculty announcing “As you may have learned, the college’s Board of Trustees voted today to cease academic instruction after the end of the 2023-2024 academic year. The Board Chair and I will share more about this difficult decision tomorrow.”

Such announcements are not what anyone expects to hear. They are jarring, life-altering, community crushing.

What follows is a case study of what happened after these fateful announcements. It's not what always happens, but it is what can happen.

While this case study starts when the College of Saint Rose had not heeded the warning signs and wound up making a sudden decision to shutter its doors within a mere seven months, this story is focused more on what happens while finding the “next.”

Navigating the Collapse: Immediate Reactions and Mindsets

After the initial shock, in addition to maintaining professional and personal obligations, faculty and staff found themselves in cognitive dissonance. What needed to be done, when everything was unraveling? How does one, or a department, or an institution, continue the mission while it is falling apart? Professional discipline, values, and mindset were integral to confronting the crisis. Having lived through years of restructuring, program cuts, and “cut and grow” measures at the institution, there had always been questions, inklings that all might not be well. Despite ongoing institutional assurances, the department leadership team at the College of Saint Rose had contemplated the “what ifs.” They had a plan, albeit one they never really thought they would have to enact. They had enough information to know they had options. They could try to move the department and programs. More importantly, they had an “all can’t be lost” and “preservation” mindset that drove them to act swiftly and

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