

2021

Chapter 6

Value Added: Mergers to Increase Learning

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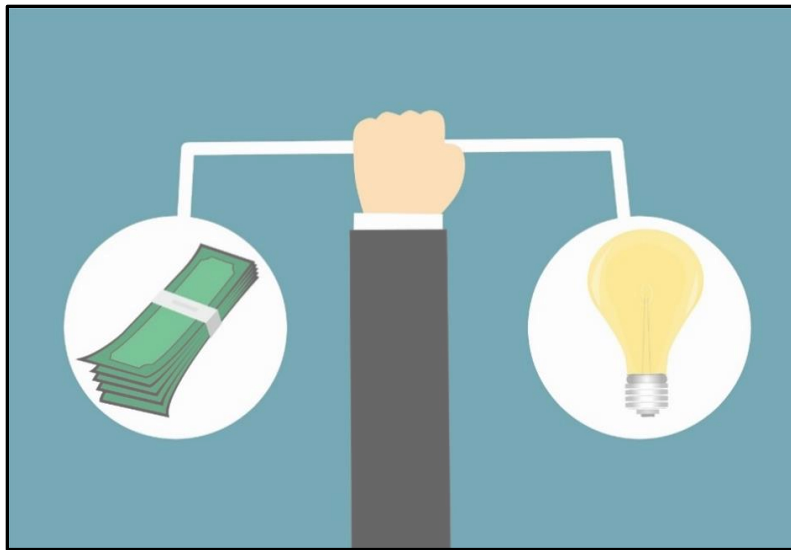


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About the Authors

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RECOMMENDED CITATION, APA 7TH ED

Kjesrud, R. D. & McDaniel, S. (2021). Value added: Mergers to increase learning. In R. D. Kjesrud, P. Hemsley, S. Jensen, & E. Winningham (Eds.), *Learning enhanced: Studio practices for engaged inclusivity* (pp. 6.1 – 6.31). Western Libraries CEDAR. https://cedar.wwu.edu/learning_enhanced/10

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Abstract

If Chapter 3, “Academic Literacies as Ecology” provides a bottom-up pedagogical rationale for merging literacies, this chapter focuses on an institutional, top-down rationale for merging academic support programs. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are facing increasing costs at a time when both revenues and the traditional college-age demographic are dramatically shrinking. Meanwhile, the hopefully transient SARS-CoV-2 pandemic is serving to spotlight unsustainability baked into the higher education industry and to fuel stakeholders’ increasing demands for value. For HEIs to succeed, administrators must find efficiencies just to keep the lights on. Increasingly, administrators propose consolidations among academic support programs, because although mandated by accrediting bodies, these programs are often perceived as resource drains tangential to the core mission. Support program leaders typically resist consolidation trends, however, creating politically risky conflict between institutional and program interests. In this chapter, we explain the very real existential pressures on HEIs, illuminate the ways inevitable mergers create transformational opportunities to increase learning, and suggest principles for negotiating cultural differences when programs pro-actively seek collectivization.

Keywords: Higher education economy, learning commons, increasing learning, conflict leadership, change leadership, program effectiveness

It's a typical day across the whole second floor of Western Libraries, home to our Learning Commons¹. As I arrive for my shift, the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio is in full swing with about 40 visitors spread out across the living room, focus area, collaborative area, and our classroom. Several visitors summon Studio Assistants when they get stuck; they get a little advice, learn a new strategy, and keep working. I spot a project group I consulted with weekly last term; when I stop to answer a couple of questions, I note they are successfully using one of our strategies for group process. After assuring me they are making good progress and asking me to check back later, I move on to greet new arrivals, including two visitors arriving independently to study for the same linguistics exam. I introduce them and leave them happily collaborating. Another visitor overheard me explaining what we do in the Studio; although he is what we call an accidental tourist (unaware he was in the Studio), he immediately asks for résumé advice. Later I greet two highly anxious accounting majors who have developed a daily habit of working in the Studio "in case they get stuck." At no time in my history have I seen students this engaged in forming their own learning community and in taking agency over their learning. Nor have I seen outcomes so robust or impact so broad. After literally growing up in the Writing Center, I thought I would be distraught about leaving my 30-year identity behind. But no such thing. My only regret is that it took so long.

—Reflections of former writing center director Roberta Kjesrud

¹ Western Libraries' Learning Commons is a consortium of co-located support services currently including the Center for Community Learning, Center for Instructional Innovation and Assessment, Digital Media Center, and Student Technology Center. Three additional Learning Commons' partners are also organizationally part of Western Libraries: Hacherl Research & Writing Studio, Teaching & Learning Academy, and the Tutoring Center. Find more information and pictures here: https://library.wvu.edu/learning_commons.

Founded by the English Department in 1978, Western's Writing Center became largely itinerant beginning in 1990 when the program embraced writing across the curriculum. Although we consistently reported to the Provost or Vice-Provost for the next 20 years, we were relocated spatially some thirteen times. In 2010, motivated by administrative efficiencies and a desire to create a learning commons, University administration proposed moving the Writing Center back to the Libraries, this time both spatially and organizationally. Initially, both University and Library administration thought that assigning us two tables in 300 square feet would be adequate. After all, the Libraries offered research help from an outsized service desk—how different could writing help be? Once the Libraries understood the Center needed more than just a service point, they settled us into a spacious but windowless main floor bunker. With visions of collaboration, Research Consultation relocated nearby, but impenetrable concrete walls thwarted our attempts. Finally, in spring 2015, two founding Learning Commons' partners—Research Consultation and the Writing Center—merged in a new space called the Hacherl Research & Writing Studio.

In 2016, I (Sarah²) came on the scene as Western Libraries' Director of Teaching and Learning & the Learning Commons. No stranger to the trials of integration, I began my career as the Instructional Services Coordinator at the University of Southern California's Leavey Library, joining a corps of talented leaders charged with a visionary endeavor: to integrate research and computing organizations. Integration was hard work at every level of the organization; achievements were marred by conflicts around leadership, spaces, and budgets. Long after my departure, the merger was reversed, and

² As of this writing, Sarah McDaniel is the Director of Learning and User Services at California State University, Fresno.

the two organizations separated. Why? Perhaps it was difficult to deliver on the merger's anticipated value, perhaps cost savings provided inadequate motivation, or perhaps culture ate strategy for breakfast. This failure still speaks: even the best-matched couples face inevitable challenges as there are few rule books for bridging entrenched institutional silos. Yet in the face of a shrinking student demographic and exponentially increasing economic pressures, mergers and consolidations are becoming more the rule than the exception across higher education, and unit leaders and practitioners must choose how to respond. Perceiving mergers as threats rather than opportunities, many program leaders defend against them, but Western Washington University (WWU) library and writing center professionals took a proactive approach: we voluntarily merged to increase student learning.

This warts-included chapter recounts how collective will around increased learning helped two different units overcome both cultural and structural challenges of merging, and we offer a planning heuristic for program leaders who are voluntarily or involuntarily planning mergers. But first, we begin by overviewing the increasingly difficult fiscal and relevancy challenges facing the higher education industry, most predating the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, but both exacerbated by it. To survive and thrive, higher education institutions (HEIs) must cut costs and deliver more learning. We argue that academic support program leaders would do well to understand this mandate, to embrace efficiency and effectiveness as equally strong rationales for streamlining institutional structure, and to leverage disruption and collectivism as opportunities for innovation in improving learning. Finally, we present principles for surviving—no, thriving—during times of structural and pedagogical change.

The Value Mandate in HEIs

Scholarship around academic support services seldom acknowledges the political landscape framing why higher education sponsors these services in the first place. For over two decades, higher education has been significantly disrupted by economic, demographic, and societal pressures. Decreasing state support, changing student demographics, and emerging competition from online and two-year colleges have increased pressure to eliminate low priority functions, erase historical silos, and reduce barriers to innovation (Blumenstyk, 2014, p. 109). Institutions are in a bind: accreditors mandate and stakeholders demand support service amenities to compete for students, but costs are unsustainable. As a result, institutions increasingly subsidize costly upper-division courses and boutique programs with proceeds from large undergraduate courses and professional master's degrees. This reliance on "internal cross-subsidies" (2014, p. 87), says Blumenstyk, has left institutions economically vulnerable to unbundling, where students forego loyalty to a single institution and complete degree requirements at less costly competitors.

Even prior to the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic of 2019-2020³, higher education faced daunting fiscal challenges. *Chronicle of Higher Education* staff writer Lee Gardner asserts that, "After years of declining enrollments and ebbing tuition revenues, colleges face levels of financial unpredictability not seen since the Great Recession" (2020), a claim corroborated by the *Chronicle's* pre-pandemic, sound-the-alarm reports such as *The Recession-Proof College: How to Weather the Coming Economic Storm* (Kafka, 2020) and *The Looming Enrollment Crisis: How Colleges are Responding to New*

³ The pandemic is predicted to last at least through 2021, but there is no reliable end date in sight.

Demographics and New Student Needs (Kelderman et al., 2019). With inflationary costs and a dawning economic reckoning, HEIs can no longer assume stakeholders perceive value in higher education. Proof of value matters. But as mounting economic pressures increasingly involve legislatures and educational policymakers, administrators, faculty, staff, and students may no longer be the loudest voices in determining how to measure it (Kuh et al., 2015). So as public perception of higher education's value has plummeted and as students rightly want to know what jobs their education will qualify them for, government agencies advance competing systems to measure quality and learning (Blumenstyk, 2014, p. 112).

But even the best demonstrations of learning don't pay the bills. Given that HEIs are under increasing pressure to protect the core mission and cut so-called dead wood, academic support services must increasingly prove centrality to that core. Fortunately, the literacies we support *are* core. The Association of American Colleges and Universities' (AACU) *Liberal Education and America's Promise* (LEAP) initiative explicitly champions universal outcomes such as written and oral communication, information literacy, inquiry, and analysis—all of which co-implicate libraries and writing centers in campus-level initiatives to improve learning. HEIs market these campus amenities to students, parents, and accreditors as basic supports for success, but when shove comes to push over core funding, administrators often characterize academic support services as *cost centers* that constitute a tax on departments' profitability⁴. Competition for campus resources even threatens departments; an

⁴ For examples of ways libraries have considered the impacts of new fiscal realities in higher education, see the Association of College and Research Libraries' *Environmental Scan 2017* (2017) and UW-Madison's *Budget Allocation Model* (Budget Model Review Committee, 2014).

increasing number of institutions no longer automatically allocate incremental budget increases to departments, but instead hold them accountable to new algorithms for profitability; as a result, strapped departments are unlikely to support generous allocations to central services like libraries and writing centers when a constellation of individual academic support programs are perceived as nickel-and-dime budget drains.

Pandemic Pressures

If real economic and demographic pressures afflicted HEIs before 2019, the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic exponentially increased them. Conditions change rapidly, but at the time of this writing, the U.S. is in economic chaos: unemployment is tentatively improving after reaching nearly 15% (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.), but new bankruptcies are still announced daily, and while the U.S. stock market has rebounded from catastrophic lows (S&P Dow Jones Indices, A Division of S&P Global, n.d.), state revenues remain in freefall. Just one institution alone, The Johns Hopkins University, projects a \$375,000,000 shortfall for the 2020-21 fiscal year (June, 2020). For schools public and private, cash is flowing in the wrong direction as institutions reimburse hundreds of millions in room and board and as their endowments are subject to double digits market risk (Gardner, 2020). Although we hope the pandemic quickly becomes a historical footnote, Purdue University President Mitchel Daniels suggests that “[f]or most of higher ed, [the pandemic] is an inflection point...a time that will probably lead to ‘ongoing, permanent changes in the way we do things’” (as cited in Gardner, 2020).

Change has already begun. During the first months of the pandemic, most schools moved to online-only instruction in the expectation of resuming business as usual in fall 2020. As hundreds of schools reneged on opening face-to-face, many that did reopen moved back online when infections surged. In a synopsis of ten ways SARS-

CoV-2 has already affected higher education, *Chronicle* staff writer Allison Vaillancourt (2020) lists the following: 230+ breach-of-contract lawsuits filed, 40% (or more) increase in student food insecurity, millions of new dollars spent on infection control, a 5% drop in FAFSA applications, abundant layoffs and furloughs of adjunct and housing/student affairs staff, and massive declines in small business revenue to states. These developments are all moving targets but suffice to say that “[h]igher education will be one of the last industries to resume business as usual” (Kelchen, 2020). As long as infection control practices are required, high-touch, close-contact academic support services may be among the last of the last to resume face-to-face teaching and learning.

Of course, pandemics come and go; so too do economic downturns. But there is little doubt that the pandemic is forcing HEIs to address pre-existing unsustainable costs. In his *Chronicle of Higher Education* commentary titled “How to Address the Elephant in the Room: Academic Costs,” business professor Paul N. Friga (2020) analyzes cost trends in both public and private institutions of higher learning. His data suggest that, after the Great Recession (2008-09), most industries reduced cost per output, except higher education where spending per capita increased as much as 40%. While HEIs were busy kicking the unsustainability can, the pandemic reckoning arrived. Yet despite no shortage of bad news, some see opportunity. Simmons University president Helen Drinan boldly suggests: “Over the next year, we very well may see 40 years’ worth of long-needed changes to our academic model. ... We should use this opportunity to reinvent how we do things, and that includes a hard look at the academic side of the house” (as cited in Friga, 2020). *Chronicle* staff writer Goldie Blumenstyk (2020) also takes a bright-side approach by pointing out innovations that may be long

overdue, including expansion opportunities afforded by ending over-reliance on built space⁵ and on equity opportunities afforded by expanded access. It seems the entire higher education system is poised to pursue new models for delivering a quality, equitable, affordable education, a dream that unites all constituents.

Given the far-from-rosy HEI political economy, academic support professionals should expect efficiency imperativesss to prompt more consolidations. But merger proposals from beleaguered administrators have historically been met with strong practitioner resistance. Marshalling impact data and program evaluations, support units hope that central administrators will see enough value in stand-alone programs to retain autonomy. For instance, both libraries and writing centers have heeded calls to demonstrate value and increase impact, but to date, they have mostly done so independently⁶. Staff in writing centers and libraries rightly see our units as key campus participants in enhancing cross-disciplinary engagement and supporting high-impact practices (Kuh, 2005). But accelerating competition for resources (including between like-purposed units) suggests that academic support units had best learn to navigate the risks and rewards of merger initiatives like learning commons⁷, because there are compelling rationales for doing so: money and learning.

Merging for Value: Efficiency

Practitioners typically care more about learning than the distasteful bottom line, but we believe practitioners should also care about helping our HEIs meet existential

⁵ See [Chapter 4, “Placemaking through Learner-based Design”](#) for discussions of built space.

⁶ See [Chapter 3, “Academic Literacies as Ecology”](#) for more on how the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) pursued highly aligned frameworks in isolation.

⁷ For more on how libraries, writing centers, and learning commons administrators can understand the larger budget pressures in higher education, see Barr and McClellan (2018).

challenges. Obviously, if our institutions fail, so will we. Although HEI administrators view a learning commons as consolidations that enhance learning while creating resource efficiencies, few administrators fully appreciate the cultural chaos mergers precipitate for program personnel who are left to resolve clashing pedagogies, staffing models, and leadership values. To practitioners, the pain of merging is real, while the value of saving the institutional bottom line (especially for under-resourced programs) is all too abstract. Practitioners may see efficiency as a threat to effectiveness, and many perceive administrators that propose mergers as motivated less by enhancing learning and more by penny-pinching⁸. Yet we argue that administrators are more motivated by effectiveness than practitioners are by efficiency. (Fortunately, efficiency and effectiveness are not mutually exclusive.) For the rest of this chapter, we invite practitioners to suspend skepticism while we consider the value of merging structures to save resources, be they time, space, or cash. Using an example from the former writing center, I (Roberta) recount how collectivizing resulted in needed efficiencies for central administration, but unexpectedly resulted in more, not fewer, resources for supporting students.

When our Writing Center reported initially to the Provost and later to a Vice-Provost, I often felt nobody was home. Given the busy administrative demands of their positions, I remember the year I did not see my boss at all. While I enjoyed the autonomy, lack of attention from the top was far from ideal for the program and therefore for learning. I had such limited access to conversations around resources that I

⁸ WCS professionals have a long history of suspecting administrators that administrators are entirely capricious in their decision-making. For an early discussion of that history, see “War, Peace, and Writing Center Administration” (Simpson et al., 1994).

often learned of budget cuts long after they were a done deal, and it was during this time that our program was moved every six months. We just didn't have a seat at the table in allocating resources, either money or space. This itinerant phase nearly killed the Center, partly because constituents couldn't keep up with our location and partly because the sites chosen for us were leftovers in buildings nobody could find. Traffic dwindled, and with the statistical collapse of the program⁹, I couldn't make a case for more resources. No amount of publicity could offset this level of administrative inattention. While it was tempting to blame them, administrators were rightly attending to resourcing courses and majors, and graduation and accreditation requirements. Not only do administrators have limited resources to allocate, they have very limited time to understand the nuances of academic support programs. From the upper-level point of view, small programs drain more time than money, so off-loading my program fiscally and my position administratively reduced costly overhead. With a casual phone call, I learned that both the Writing Center and my reporting line would merge into the Libraries. What could go wrong?

It was a hard landing. Central administration worked with the Libraries to resource us with a small, student fee-based allocation, 300 square feet (shared with two other programs), and three tables and a couch. Four unidyllic years later, we moved into 1400 square feet of our very own, but it was in an ugly bunker nobody could find. There were staff-related integration challenges as well, but even so, I would increasingly begin to wonder why I had ever valued short reporting lines in the first place¹⁰. Now a decade

⁹ During SARS-CoV-2, most writing centers are reporting steep declines in usage on professional listservs.

¹⁰ Though I can't trace its provenance, I have internalized lore suggesting writing center directors should keep reporting lines short for best access to resources. I regret it taking me so long to realize that strategy worked very poorly at my institution. See [Interchapter 6A, "Pandemacademia"](#) for more on the costs of autonomy.

under the Libraries & Learning Commons umbrella, and with several layers between me and the Provost, we flourish with a larger staff, a bigger budget, and more space in a premium location. Best yet, we started reporting to a Dean who made time to understand the value we brought to student learning, to communicate that value up the administrative chain, and to investigate the potential of moving from casual cooperation to true integration.

Merging for Value: Learning

Saving resources in times like these should be incentive enough, but as it happens, the benefits to student learning are an even greater reward for risking our discrete identities. Full-on collaboration entails overcoming competing priorities, addressing cultural differences, and remaking organizational structures—challenges both fraught and inconvenient. Yet it is precisely this kind of dissonance that prompts transformations with the greatest potential to create more value. Threats, it turns out, create opportunities. But if practitioners stay stuck in resistance, those opportunities seldom emerge. For instance, in 1990, South Carolina’s Department of Education, driven by political, sociological, and economic exigencies, eliminated tertiary funding for any instruction deemed developmental (read remedial). This change created an immediate disruption to standard practice for the University of South Carolina’s English Department, especially for writing studies (WS) practitioners (Grego & Thompson, 2008, p. 2). Grego and Thompson realized the combination of state and locally mandated cuts most threatened students traditionally marginalized from college success, but they didn’t spend any time resisting the inevitable. Instead, they innovated, introducing writing studio pedagogy (WSP) as an equity-based method of instruction

that better met composition's socially progressive goals in supporting underserved students (2008, p. 5). Although creating writing studios did not involve unit mergers, the approach demonstrates the way economic and political crises can prompt innovation of precisely the sort it takes to survive and thrive in the current HEI landscape.

Collective efforts provide a disruptive impetus that can't be duplicated from the comfort of our business-as-usual individual programs. Like it did for the University of South Carolina, our disruption sent us back to the pedagogical drawing board for a great reset, leading to innovations that created unanticipated opportunity. When Dean Greenberg called me into his office to ask what we could do with a million dollars, it wasn't because he had a spare million rattling around in his slush fund¹¹. But deans are tasked with raising private monies, and donors seldom rally around business as usual efforts. By collectivizing, our new signature pedagogies captured the enthusiasm of donors precisely because of this transformational vision. Of course, not every merger or innovation will attract donors, but even without them, collectives leverage value for the good of all programs. Collaboration is written into the DNA of writing centers and libraries, but we still mostly go at it alone. Yes, mergers may mean more aggravation, less autonomy, more scrutiny, added conflict—even sacrifice. But the status of peer-based research and writing support for students on our campus has never been more secure.

Managing Change Pain

If we've been at all persuasive with the foregoing *why*, know that we're now switching to the *how*, because our professional literatures suggest woefully few

¹¹ Note: Dr. Mark Greenberg does not have a slush fund!

strategies for merging units that have long histories as separate entities. We're not going to lie: change brings pain, and the extent and nature of that pain will be context-driven. In this chapter, however, we're approaching merger changes from the systems level so that leaders can anticipate conflict and tailor context-specific methods for negotiating change. In the next sections, then, we identify patterns of challenge, including cultural, pedagogical, and structural differences¹², give an example of a still-resolving thorny issue from our merger, and then extract the change-leadership principles we have identified so far. Even after five years, we don't always know how to navigate these challenges, but we're learning—and we invite you to learn with us.

As promised, in this section we'll look at a particularly troublesome challenge likely to emerge in any integration initiative: a clash of staffing models. Writing centers, even those staffed by graduate students or faculty, generally value a peer ethos, a value loosely shared by our Learning Commons partners. But while our Libraries' staff appreciated student help for checking out or shelving books, the teaching and learning work of information literacy was traditionally provided by faculty librarians. Our Studio integrates not only literacies but also staff of all types: undergraduates (interns, seniors, and student coordinators), graduates, paraprofessionals, professionals, and faculty. Some have a stronger affinity for research, others for writing. Since these affinities largely align with position types—undergrads with writing, faculty with research—divides between student and faculty staff can run deep. The flattened hierarchies of student authority, cornerstones of peer learning, made it difficult for faculty to respond

¹² See Appendix A, pp. 28-29, for a heuristic to use in predicting cultural, pedagogical, and structural tensions that may surface in program mergers.

easily to student-led initiatives. For some faculty, participating alongside student colleagues in student-led professional development sessions or taking on-shift direction from undergraduate managers took the novelty of working alongside students too far. Not all faculty intrinsically value authority-sharing behaviors, and very few institutions value authority-sharing in extrinsic rewards, namely tenure and promotion.

Anticipating this culture clash, we scaffolded integration incrementally. We first co-located to develop staff familiarity and to build a community of practice across roles. Next, we transitioned from traditional writing center practice to SBL pedagogies, with students at the forefront in pioneering new practices. Last, we developed a timetable for integrating literacies, ensuring that all staff, despite their primary literacy affiliation, felt equipped to coach across literacies. We also garnered conceptual faculty support by developing a heuristic that would help student staff triage the level of expertise student visitors needed in their presenting concerns. Staff all agreed that peer tutors would take primary responsibility for most research-reading-writing concerns, and that professionals and faculty would be called in to co-consult when visitors' needs were highly specialized (for our triage heuristic, see Appendix B, p. 30). This plan encouraged faculty to retain ownership of subject-area expertise, and it also placed them in a highly respected mentoring role with peer assistants.

Despite these best-laid plans, student staff became increasingly caught in oppressive power dynamics that undermined our ethic of inclusion. What's more, although the problem was painfully obvious to the change team, the larger community of practice was slower to recognize the inequitable dynamic. As change leaders, we remained curious, asking questions to understand what values and identities were at stake. For instance, we used Jeffrey Buller's work to analyze organizational culture and

illuminate the systemic underpinnings of this staffing conflict. We noted that writing centers tend to be highly decentralized (2015, pp. 14–16); that is, decision-making authority is shared between student and professional staff, so decisions are made collectively with substantial input from all staff. Libraries, on the other hand, mirror more closely the university’s hierarchical “distributive culture,” which authorizes decision-making by role status (Buller, 2015, pp. 16–18). Given faculty authority and loyalty to academic freedom, faculty work more collegially than collaboratively; a community of practice led by students sat uncomfortably and perhaps threatened a core faculty value. Rather than becoming reactive, we kept adapting the negotiation strategies¹³ that already brought us so far, and we stayed curious enough to discover and implement new ones. No matter how well-managed, change takes time.

Principles for Change Leadership

Although working through the planning heuristic allowed us to anticipate most merger pain points, we are still learning how to resolve tensions as they arise. Even well-planned change is threatening, and no amount of careful staging eliminates all the fears that naturally accompany uncertainties and perceived risk. Some personnel will fear change more than others, but unsettling times call for deft and empathic leadership. Though our list of change leadership strategies is far from exhaustive, these principles have helped us most in amicably charting a collective path.

- **Develop shared vision and urgency around student learning.**

With upwards of 50 affiliated personnel in the Studio and more than 150 in the

¹³ For a consideration of the conflict negotiation strategies that emerged from the earliest days of Western’s writing-researching integration initiative, see Kjesrud and Wislocki (2011).

Teaching & Learning Division housing the Studio, our partners brought to our confederation disparate curricula, pedagogical traditions, professional values, incentive structures, institutional histories, and disciplinary traditions. Yet after engaging in a backward design process that began with goals for learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005), our Division and Learning Commons enjoys near-universal, ongoing agreement about co-created outcomes establishing what students should learn and about what our roles are in that learning. All levels of Studio personnel worked to create these umbrella outcomes, and we've easily made them relevant to the integrated literacies our Studio supports¹⁴. Perhaps not every staff member can recite these outcomes at any given moment, but they function as a uniting touchstone. As change leaders, we see constant reminders that successful integration begins and sustains through these shared outcomes.

- **Help stakeholders understand change processes and develop behaviors necessary for innovation.**

As much as relying on shared goals, transformative innovation equally relies on articulating a philosophy that helps stakeholders trust change as a healthy and exciting process. Professor John Kotter argues that change processes can fail when stakeholders don't understand the need for change or feel that the need implies personal criticism. It's human nature for inertia to prevail, so "the pain of doing nothing [needs to become] greater than the pain of doing something" (as cited in Buller, 2015, p. 7). Understanding change models helps early adopters relish new opportunities and helps resisters understand their reactions as normal in the change arc¹⁵. Change leaders can help

¹⁴ A complete list of outcomes and the practices that support them may be found in [Chapter 5, "Using Assessment to Prompt Innovation."](#)

¹⁵ See Buller (2015) for three change models, all of which predict resistance.

stakeholders understand the values of a “learning organization” (Senge, 1994), where members embrace inherent tensions as creative energy fueling transformation. In outlining ways small acts can lead to undoing systems of oppression, business change leader Debra Meyerson (2001) acknowledges the reality that people grow slowly. Transformation only becomes possible when change leaders patiently and recursively choose doable acts that carry a high probability of success, affirm experimentation, let stakeholders see the benefits, and then leverage new realizations to develop slightly more challenging doable acts. We actively apply this incremental principle to our staffing model tensions by piloting each fall new ways of engaging faculty. And we’re happy to report that many early tensions are resolving.

- **Scaffold interdependence based on stakeholder strengths.**

When challenges arose during partnership-building, it was tempting to create elaborate workarounds or avoidant escape hatches. Sometimes we wanted to call the whole thing off. Instead, we resisted our fight-flight-freeze urges by doubling down on our commitment. Closing escape avenues during high conflict feels risky—often it *is* risky. But we wanted to build this level of interdependence: when one fails, we all do; when one succeeds, we all do. Creating and reinforcing symbiosis means recognizing and trusting our new partners’ strengths while staying humble enough about our own to keep learning, even when we feel like we are relinquishing sacred truth. Fixating on strengths within our new community of practice created both safety and safeguards. Times of deep conflict test our commitment to staying strength-focused, but because we’re truly committed to innovation, we return to the qualities of a learning organization: valuing dissent and staying curious during conflict (Senge, 1994). At the

height of our staffing models conflict, it was tempting to blame: all would be well if only we had X or Y circumstance, or if only we could get rid of people like X and have more people like Y. If we catch ourselves finding fault, we just stop. Our progress all along has relied on a foundation of collective strengths, and the only way through conflict is to keep building on them.

- **Plan and enact joint curricula.**

After establishing shared learning outcomes, we decided what needed to be taught, coached, or imparted to achieve the desired learning (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 19). Teachers from both writing and library backgrounds let go of familiar curricula and collectively designed a sequence of three integrated research and writing workshops, *Getting Started*, *Finding & Using Sources*, and *Revising & Editing*. Negotiating both what to teach and how to teach it yielded a stronger curriculum and improved classroom practice. The greatest impact came from leveraging the pedagogical skills of writing professionals to get the entire staff centered on scaffolding process strategies, a move that created pedagogical congruence between the workshops and the Studio. This congruence registers for students because they see the connection between what they are learning in the workshops and what they are learning in Studio consultations.

- **Reward experimentation.**

Given that we were charting new territory with little evidence-based precedent, we created safety around risk-taking by rewarding trying something, regardless of success, that resulted in our own learning as practitioners. Both writing center and library professionals understand that trying—and failing up—is an integral and instructive part of the research and writing process. Writers try words, researchers try

search terms, teachers try activities: some work; some don't. Rewarding staff for a recursive try-assess-revise process provides the generative engine for innovation. Early in the change process, we speculated that our youthful student staff would automatically be more comfortable with risk. But after informal research surveying peer tutors and professionals about their comfort with experimentation, we found that students cling to tradition as often as professionals. What is different in leading students through change, however, is relative ease in creating and modifying reward structures. Given that tenure and promotion rewards solo efforts more than collective ones and teaching successes more than failures, we are still working through ways to extrinsically reward faculty collaboration and risk-taking.

- **Design formative assessments to inform practices¹⁶.**

Our separate units brought to the merger a confusing array of established program evaluation routines and directives, few of them useful in gauging and improving learning. Shared outcomes prompted us to design new formal and informal assessments to gain insights on our innovations. Taking a break from accountability-driven evaluative practices opened space for curiosity and intellectual engagement around understanding how our literacies work together and which practices most further student growth, affirming the adage that “the rubber meets the road with assessment” (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005, p. 19). We enjoy a lively culture of assessment driven by our outcomes and by the curiosities of our main practitioners: undergraduates. Since undergraduate research aligns with the university's mission,

¹⁶ See [Chapter 5, “Using Assessment to Prompt Innovation”](#) for more on how formative assessments forward practices.

assessment projects are well-supported by administration, are well-received at professional conferences, and have driven several program improvements as they deepen our understanding of the Studio as a site that both supports classroom learning and offers distinct outcomes of its own.

- **Establish a community of practice eager to implement evidence-based improvements.**

Teaching and consulting together across roles forged an inclusive community of practice. For example, facilitating workshops collaboratively allowed librarians, writing professionals, and peer tutors opportunities to observe one another and engage in informal assessment and reflection as facilitation teams. In fact, teaching together has given us new understandings of the ways we connect to other academic literacies represented across our Division and our Learning Commons. When the Studio and the Student Technology Center developed and facilitated workshops on designing research posters, we not only experienced each other's pedagogies, but we also developed a deeper appreciation for the intersections between writing and technological literacies. In the fall of 2019, we also began collaborating with other units around teaching study and time management skills, and we began exploring the deep connections between listening and speaking and the other academic literacies supported in the Studio¹⁷. In short, teaching together begets more teaching together, and doing so across the Libraries and the Learning Commons has yielded an inclusive community of practice committed to crossing boundaries, reflection, entrepreneurialism, and risk-taking, all to benefit student learning.

¹⁷ For more on connecting literacies, see [Chapter 3, "Academic Literacies as Ecology."](#)

Status Quo Risk and Change Reward

It's time to challenge the culture of fear surrounding structural collaboration with other academic support programs. While we do not minimize the professional trauma that may result from badly implemented alliances, we think that programmatic isolation or superficial collaboration represents an unacknowledged and potentially greater risk. Humans, even highly educated ones, are vulnerable to biases that distort fears. For instance, in their Nobel Prize winning "Prospect Theory" outlining how humans assess risk, Kahneman and Tversky (1979) outline a lengthy list of cognitive distortions that plague human thinking. Defying research, humans statistically fear flying more than freeway driving and public speaking more than rock climbing, even though the second activity carries far greater risk (Levitt & Dubner, 2005). Academics like to think we're immune to irrationality, but we are as likely as anyone to exaggerate small-scale risks and minimize large-scale ones. Well-positioned to appreciate large-scale risk and rightly engaged in heading them off, HEI administrators propose mergers not because they don't value our programs but precisely because they do. But consumed by the demands of day-to-day survival, academic support professionals under-appreciate the degree to which our industry is on fire.

Given this larger context, co-curricular teaching and learning programs must be willing to maximize both student learning and resource efficiency. Co-sponsored events and co-locations may be an admirable start, but in a climate demanding more value than any single program can deliver, stand-alone programs are in jeopardy. As Lori Salem's research reveals, writing centers arose not in response to local visionaries with a good idea but rather in response to the higher educational context (2014, p. 15). If the

new political wave in higher education makes academic support consolidations as inevitable as we think, not even the most passionate and charismatic leader can stop the wave. Although negotiating stakeholder differences in pedagogy, culture, and administration is challenging, truly integrating support services has the potential to deliver learning outcomes of enduring value while being a great equalizer in promoting engaged inclusivity. Pursuing these outcomes may be challenging, but it's the right thing to do—and doing right is not risky at all.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to my estimable and generous colleague Dr. Felicia M. Karas (Montana State University Billings, Associate Director of Writing, Academic Support Center) for her insightful and formative feedback on an early draft.

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Appendix A

Heuristic for Anticipating and Resolving Conflict

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS			
	Research Consultation	Writing Center	Merged in Studio
Pedagogy			
Face to face Methods	Reference interview; drop-in based with few appointments	Non-directive questioning; appointment-based with some drop-in	Primarily drop-in; offer limited appointments
Online Methods	Chat; Library Guides (LibGuides)	Asynchronous screencasts/written; handout resources	Adopt all; add interactive online learning objects
Focus	Finding users resources for current project	Offering reader response to prompt revision	Scaffolding strategies; prompt metacognition for transfer of learning
Culture			
Ethos	Professional; service ethic	Student-oriented, peer feedback ethic	Unite in thirdspace working environment
Authority	Expertise, direction oriented	Peer guide oriented	Value all expertise from both peers and professionals; egalitarian
Literacy	Research only	Writing only	Integrate research and writing; add reading, listening, speaking
Location	Main floor library	Itinerant, moved every 2 years on average	Main floor library
Space	Service desk; no walls/doors, nearly always open	Walls & doors, locked when closed; consulting tables; often served as tutor lounge	No walls/doors; open for use when not staffed; zones of function: living room, collaborative space, focused space, classroom

Structure			
Reportage & Oversight	Bureaucratic — Dean of Libraries, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs	Autonomous — Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education	Bureaucratic — Director of Teaching & Learning/Learning Commons, Dean of Libraries, VP for Academic Affairs
Budget & Accountability	Large, state budget supported	Shoestring, self-sustaining budget through student fees	Both
Leadership	Informal head, rotating	Director/AD, permanent; student leader positions	Originally (now evolving): Head of Research, Director & AD of WC, Student Supervisor, Student Coordinators
Staffing	Professionals (12); Undergrad research assistants (4)	Undergraduates (30); Graduates (2-3)	Undergraduates (~40) Professionals (~12) Graduates (~3)
Full time Roles	Tenure-track faculty, classified paraprofessionals	Professional staff	Faculty/staff
Professional Development			
Onboarding	Ad hoc with faculty mentor	Course, 5 credits, for first-year tutors	Paid staff education: Approximately 20 hours for first two quarters
Ongoing education	Ad hoc, different for each staff role	5 hours per quarter for all tutors/leads	4 paid hours per quarter, student led labs for all staff, including pros
Staff meetings	Bi-monthly for pros	Quarterly orientation for all staff (paid)	Quarterly orientation for all staff (paid)

Appendix B

Staff Expertise Triage Heuristic¹⁸

Level	Responsibilities	Staff Role	Referral
1 Entry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer directional questions • Provide referrals across Learning Commons • Coach students in finding sources • Search Library FAQ for information 	All library staff	N/A
2 Basic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Answer questions about RWS services • Provide feedback and strategies for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Analyzing assignments ✓ Brainstorm topics, inquiry questions, keywords ✓ Finding & evaluating sources ✓ Reading and analyzing sources ✓ Organizing ideas ✓ Constructing a thesis ✓ Looking up citation styles ✓ Proofreading for patterns of error 	All Studio staff	N/A
3 Advanced	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide feedback and strategies for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Using databases to find sources ✓ Evaluating sources ✓ Synthesizing sources ✓ Improving elements of cohesion ✓ Addressing metacognition and affect • Assist with specialized needs: learning diversities, multilinguals, groups 	2 nd -year+ Studio Assistants & Pros	Bring in Senior SA or Pro for co-consult
4 Specialized	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide feedback and strategies for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Finding highly specialized sources ✓ Meeting discipline-specific conventions • Assist with complex learning/language difference • Assist graduate students and faculty • Collaborate across the curriculum 	Student Leads & Pros	Call Pro for co-consult or referral

¹⁸ In addition to staff role, we use a badging system to denote specialized expertise that we defer to in triage.