Mergers, Affiliations, and Consortiums

Post-Secondary Collaboration in Canada
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Key findings

- Collaborative frameworks—including mergers, affiliations, and consortiums—provide opportunities for post-secondary institutions to provide high-quality, diverse educational pathways, while also responding to growing demographic and financial challenges.

- Mergers remain relatively rare in Canada, but there are signs that post-secondary institutions are increasingly open to new frameworks for collaboration.

- Cost savings associated with post-secondary mergers and other collaborative frameworks are often overstated, but there are well-established, non-monetary benefits. They include an enhanced student experience and increased overall quality of partnering institutions.

- A government directive for institutions to plan a merger can kick-start the process. However, the government’s subsequent role should be to facilitate, not control negotiations.

- Successful mergers come from careful planning and stakeholder engagement. Where possible, planners should look for alignment in programs, institutional structure, and identity.

- Canadian post-secondary systems are largely stable and well-funded by public sources, making mergers less likely to occur compared with international peer countries.
Introduction

Like marriages, mergers between post-secondary education (PSE) institutions typically involve two parties, with considerable planning before assets are legally combined. And, in both cases, it’s almost always easier to get in than out.

In Canada, our institutions are seemingly reluctant to “take the plunge.” Compared to peer countries like Australia or the United Kingdom, PSE mergers are rare in Canada and, as a result, the topic receives little attention.\(^1\) Canadian colleges, polytechnics, and universities are facing growing financial and demographic pressures. Therefore, it is worth asking whether mergers, or other forms of institutional collaboration, are reasonable responses to emerging challenges.\(^2\)

Mergers in higher education are often associated with opportunities to enhance coordination across systems, realize cost-efficiencies, or strengthen the reputation and attractiveness of institutions. But are these perceived or actual outcomes of mergers? And what are the consequences? Which other options for collaboration are available to institutions?

This report discusses challenges and opportunities associated with different forms of institutional collaboration. It draws on Canadian and international research and is also informed by interviews. Our interviewees included economists, post-secondary researchers and strategic advisors, and senior college and university administrators with experience negotiating mergers or other collaborative frameworks. The report also explores the impacts of mergers on post-secondary stakeholders, and the factors that incentivize or deter institutions from entering into formal partnerships.

We argue that as PSE institutions respond to economic, demographic, and technological pressures, formalized collaboration—i.e., mergers, affiliations, and consortiums—are viable options for long-term stability, quality, and academic success.

Models for post-secondary collaboration

Mergers occur in all sectors. We often associate them with the private sector. Of course, governments may choose to consolidate separate departments under a single framework, just as like-minded, not-for-profit organizations or charities may choose to merge for strategic or financial reasons.\(^3\) Similarly, post-secondary institutions may choose—or be compelled—to consolidate their operations.

Precisely defined, a merger describes the process by which two or more autonomous partners merge under a unified governance and administrative structure. Post-secondary mergers may be voluntary, or forced through legislation or government directive.

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1 See, for example, Eastman and Lang, *Mergers in Higher Education*.
3 Blumberg, “Mergers and Amalgamations.”
More generally, though, the spectrum of potential arrangements remains broad, and frameworks for formal institutional collaboration include:

- merger (takeover or consolidation) resulting in unitary control;
- affiliation/federation models;
- consortia.

In each framework, the depth of the integration process depends on the extent to which partners relinquish autonomy (e.g., legal status, governance, and administrative structures). The circumstances and priorities of the institutions involved determine which framework for collaboration is appropriate.

**Takeovers**

Takeovers are mergers in which a larger, stronger partner acquires or absorbs a smaller one. In these cases, the smaller partner generally relinquishes its autonomy and legal identity. The merger can be thought of as an effective “takeover” of one institution by another, though both sides may be motivated to pursue the acquisition.

In a voluntary takeover, the smaller partner is more likely to be motivated by financial pressures, enrolment challenges, or accumulated debt, and may consider absorption by a larger partner as a means of survival. In addition, a merger with a larger institution can expand the programs and services available to students.

Larger institutions are often motivated to absorb smaller institutions for strategic or academic reasons. For example, this can provide access to specialized programs, research infrastructure, or new revenue sources. If the smaller institution is located in a different market, a merger can also provide access to a new market of potential students.

As the name implies, takeovers can also be predatory. For instance, a large, well-funded institution might leverage its size and resources to reduce competition for students and funding. But numerous examples of takeovers in higher education have shown that they can be mutually beneficial and supported by both parties. (See “Merger: Nova Scotia Agricultural College with Dalhousie University.”)

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5 Lang, “A Lexicon of Inter-Institutional Cooperation.”
6 Eastman and Lang, Mergers in Higher Education.
7 Ibid.
Merger: Nova Scotia Agricultural College with Dalhousie University

Takeovers involve larger institutions absorbing smaller ones. An example of a recent takeover in Canadian higher education is the 2012 merger of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC) with Dalhousie University. Founded in Truro in 1905, NSAC was a publicly owned institution with a strong reputation, administered through the Nova Scotia Department of Agriculture. With an enrolment of roughly 1,000 students, the college was significantly smaller than Dalhousie, which had a total enrolment of over 18,000 in 2012. The institutions had an existing relationship, where the university approved and jointly provided NSAC’s degrees.

NSAC’s status as a consolidated entity of the provincial government bureaucracy limited its ability to access new sources of funding, impacting its ability to expand or grow its programs. In addition, consultant Tim O’Neill’s 2010 Report on the University System in Nova Scotia found that the institution faced financial challenges, and recommended a merger with Dalhousie.

Following successful negotiations, NSAC was merged with Dalhousie on September 1, 2012, with its campus becoming Dalhousie University’s Agricultural Campus. Experts we spoke with for this research highlighted positive outcomes stemming from the merger. These outcomes included a broader array of interdisciplinary program options for students at both institutions, new education pathways for students in Truro, and positive benefits for faculty in relation to research pursuits.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Dalhousie University, “2012/2013 Enrolment Statistics.”
2 CBC News, “Dalhousie, Agricultural College Discuss Merger.”
Consolidation

Unlike takeovers, consolidations occur among institutions of a similar size, where both partners identify shared benefits to merging. The benefits include enhanced program offerings, a strengthened reputation, or potential cost savings.

Compared to takeovers, the result of a consolidation is more likely to amalgamate the legal identities and positive characteristics of both partners into a new, distinct institution. An example can be found in the 2008 merger of Saskatchewan's Cypress Hills Regional College and Prairie West Regional College, which became Great Plains College. The merger was motivated by the shared goal of providing broader and more responsive programs and services for students in rural Saskatchewan communities.

In addition to size, factors like geography, culture, regional demographics, and program specialization can impact the willingness of institutions to cooperate or consider a merger. Across Canada's post-secondary systems, though, both takeover and consolidation mergers are relatively rare, with just eight instances in the past 30 years (see Appendix B). Other institutional arrangements—such as federations, affiliations, or consortiums—are more common.

Affiliated and federated relationships

In affiliated or federated relationships, a host institution (usually larger) provides value to the affiliated or federated partner. In other words, the relationship involves partners that do not share equivalent status.

An affiliation describes an agreement where an institution suspends some or all of its credential-granting privileges in order to provide graduates with credentials from a larger partner, or “parent” institution. For example, St. Joseph's College and St. Stephen's College are faith-based institutions that operate as on-campus affiliates at the University of Alberta, offering courses that may be taken for degree credit by U of A students. (See “You Gotta Have Faith?”)

A federation is a specific form of affiliation. Historically, a federation describes an arrangement where multiple college or university partners (most often denominational institutions) band together to form a new university in order to build credibility and secure public funding. Laurentian University, as an example, emerged in 1960 as a bilingual federation of faith-based institutions Huntington College, University of Sudbury College, and Thorneloe College.

8 Ibid.
9 Government of Saskatchewan, "Cypress Hills and Prairie West Regional Colleges Merge."
10 Carleton University, "Carleton University Digital Objects."
11 University of Alberta, "Calendar 2016–17: Affiliated Colleges."
12 Laurentian University, "Historical Highlights."
In the modern context of Canadian higher education, federated institutions tend to be smaller institutions (denominational or secular) operating as satellites within a larger, established institution.

In a practical sense, distinctions between the terms “affiliated” and “federated” are negligible. In his 2015 report on affiliated and federated universities in Ontario, David Trick concluded, “Whether they are affiliated or federated, the practical consequences are the same.”

Affiliated or federated relationships may be desirable options where a regulatory body seeks to limit the expansion of degree/diploma-granting institutions in a post-secondary system, while promoting and allowing diverse programs and pathways through specialized institutions. Thanks to these relationships, a government avoids the need to regulate smaller, specialized institutions. Instead, the government opts to limit the smaller institution’s degree-granting status and allow a full-status degree-granting institution to manage the relationship and ensure quality.

A challenge for affiliated or federated institutions is that they are often dwarfed by their larger partners, requiring ongoing relationship building and strategic engagement. One senior administrator of a federated college explained the need to strategically manage power asymmetries in the relationship: “You have to be realistic about your scale ... and the onus is on us because [the university] is more important to us than we are to it, no matter how important we are. From the perspective of the smaller partner, you really have to be strategic about what you can do for the larger institution, and not just what it can do for you.”

As the analogy suggests, within such a relationship, the autonomy of the smaller partner is limited. While it may retain a governance and administrative structure, it is typically embedded within the broader organizational structure of the host.

In jurisdictions wishing to consolidate or better coordinate diverse PSE institutions, affiliated or federated frameworks provide opportunities for formal collaboration without requiring the closure of institutions or the creation of new ones.

13 Trick, Affiliated and Federated Universities.
14 Interview findings (confidential), June 4, 2019.
It is noteworthy that in instances where the smaller partner eventually achieves degree-granting status, the relationship has been terminated. Algoma University College, for example, held status for more than four decades as an affiliated college of Laurentian University. In 2008, the affiliated relationship was dissolved, establishing Algoma University with full autonomy and degree-granting status. Similarly, Nipissing University became an independent university with degree-granting status in 1992, following 25 years as an affiliated college (Nipissing College) of Laurentian.

You Gotta Have Faith?

Faith-based institutions occupy a unique space in Canadian post-secondary systems. And, in the modern era, many operate as affiliates of larger, secular institutions.

Many Canadian universities, including University of Ottawa, St. Francis Xavier University, and Concordia University, among others, were historically denominational institutions. (Concordia emerged from a merger of Loyola College, which had Jesuit origins, with the secular Sir George Williams University in 1974.)

Today, faith-based colleges and universities continue to provide students with a broad range of religious and secular programs. Trinity College, for example, has been a federated member of the University of Toronto since 1904, and offers both secular undergraduate programs and a post-graduate divinity school (Anglican). Similarly, St. Thomas More is a Catholic undergraduate liberal arts college federated within the University of Saskatchewan, offering more than 240 arts and science classes to students at the university.

However, these institutions face unique challenges. They include declines in subsidies from religious organizations, high rates of part-time enrolments, small endowments, and reliance on tuition discounting to attract students. As a result, denominational institutions often face financial pressures. As well, many affiliated or federated relationships in Canadian post-secondary systems involve faith-based organizations operating quasi-independently within secular public institutions.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Concordia University, “History.”
3 Trick, Affiliated and Federated Universities, 11.
Consortiums

Consortiums bring together independent partners for shared strategic purposes. (See “Consortium: The Maple League.”) While membership in a consortium may imply certain obligations or responsibilities, members maintain institutional autonomy and independent governance structures. The U15 Group of Canadian Research Universities, for example, is a consortium that advocates on behalf of 15 research-intensive public universities that collaborate on issues of shared interest. Similarly, Atlantic Colleges Atlantique brings together seven public colleges with a primary goal of raising the profile, brand, and awareness of public colleges in Atlantic Canada.15

Consortium: The Maple League

A recent consortium example is the “Maple League,” which consists of four liberal arts undergraduate universities: Bishop’s University, Acadia University, Mount Allison University, and St. Francis Xavier University.

With “a common vision and set of shared values,”1 the partnering institutions are located in smaller communities, which can present enrolment challenges. Despite significant geographic distance between the institutions, the partners collaborate on curriculum design, recruitment efforts, and marketing/branding activities while maintaining strong institutional autonomy and distinct identities.2

In the Maple League’s annual report, Executive Director Jessica Riddell explains that a key priority of the consortium is to highlight the importance of high-quality undergraduate education in Canada: “The Maple League changes the rules of the game by collaborating when universities have been hardwired to compete. Despite (or perhaps because of) our long historical traditions, our institutions are now positioned as trailblazers as the Maple League takes a leadership role in conversations about quality undergraduate education in Canada.”3

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

1 Maple League of Universities, “About.”
2 Lewington, “Why a Group of Small Universities Believes the Future is Theirs.”
Another example is the Indigenous Institutes Consortium (IIC). Founded in 1994, the IIC represents eight Indigenous-owned and controlled post-secondary education and training centres across Ontario. Advocating on behalf of member institutions—and seeking to raise the profile of Indigenous institutions, learners, and communities—the IIC illustrates the consortium model as an effective means of bringing together like-minded institutions with shared priorities.16

The emergence of consortiums across Canadian post-secondary systems has international parallels in countries including the U.K. (The Russell Group) and Australia (Group of Eight, The Australian Technology Network), although the strategic motivations for consortiums vary considerably.

Motivations for collaborating

Post-secondary institutions in Canada face increasing pressure amid demographic changes, calls for greater responsiveness to economic and labour demands, and competition for funding and students. As experts question the financial sustainability of some Canadian post-secondary institutions, governments look to find efficiencies, while at the same time increasing the value or impact of public investments in higher education. Critics suggest that significant structural changes, including potential mergers, may be a viable response to changing financial, labour market, and demographic conditions.17

Mergers, along with affiliations and consortiums, can be motivated by a range of perceived benefits, including:

- **Economic benefits**: Reduced administrative duplication, a strengthened bargaining position for the resulting institution, economies of scale, and, for smaller institutions, access to a larger institution’s resources and financial support.
- **Consolidation and coordination of systems**: Reduced complexity and fragmentation across a post-secondary system, while promoting collaboration and greater efficiency.
- **Reputational benefits**: Strengthened brand and reputation of the merged institution and surrounding region.

16 Indigenous Institutes Consortium, “About IIC.”
17 Snowdon, Canada’s Universities.
• **Labour market responsiveness**: Greater collaboration among institutions to provide regionally responsive programs and training opportunities, and access to best learning practices (work-integrated learning, lifelong learning programs).

• **Access to new or expanded markets**: Opportunities for an institution to gain access to new markets through affiliation or merger.

• **Upgraded status as a degree-granting institution**: Opportunities to gain status as a degree-granting institution for one or both institutions—providing students with a broader range of programs, pathways, or credentials.

• **Increased funding**: Enabling a federated or affiliated partner to qualify for provincial funding for which they would not otherwise be eligible (private and/or faith-based institutions, for example).

• **Increased quality**: Opportunities to pool talent, share infrastructure, enhance program offerings, improve student service, and promote collaboration may result from merging.

The section below provides an overview of key factors that may motivate Canadian post-secondary institutions to consider formalized collaboration, including through merger.

**Merging for the money**

The financial sustainability of PSE institutions, regardless of size or location, tends to be a primary concern when talk turns to institutional collaboration or merger. In his 2014 report on the financial sustainability of Canadian universities, Ken Snowdon illustrated “The Perfect Storm” of factors that may threaten the financial viability of an institution. (See Exhibit 1—used with permission).

Smaller institutions, particularly those in remote or Northern communities, may face more immediate financial challenges than larger institutions, and are more likely to consider a formalized partnership or merger as a means of survival. The timeline of Canadian PSE mergers (Appendix B) suggests that most recent mergers involve a larger institution absorbing a smaller one.

**Exhibit 1**

The ‘perfect storm’ factors influencing financial sustainability

Source: Snowdon, Canada’s Universities: Cost Pressures, Business Models, and Financial Sustainability.

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18 Snowdon, Canada’s Universities.
Mergers may occur as a result of perceived mutual benefits for the participating institutions that engage in a voluntary merger. In contrast, a forced merger may stem from legislation, funding changes, or other external factors.

Under the Canadian constitution, post-secondary education is the responsibility of the provinces and territories, which provide the bulk of operational funding to public post-secondary institutions. Periodically, provinces and territories undertake systemic reviews of post-secondary funding to identify opportunities for savings. In some cases, these reviews recommend mergers or strengthened coordination among institutions. Tim O’Neill’s 2010 Report on the University System in Nova Scotia, for example, provided a systemic overview of that province’s system, recognizing “if the province had a blank state, it would not create a university system with eleven institutions, but would design one with no more than four or five. This has led periodically to suggestions of consolidation of institutional administration.”

The report identified several institutions at risk of “serious financial challenges,” and suggested them as potential candidates for mergers. The province went on, of course, to merge the Nova Scotia Agricultural College into Dalhousie University.

Governments may incentivize or compel a merger of public institutions (i.e., a forced merger), mainly through legislation or funding changes. Internationally, there are many examples of governments directing a system-wide restructuring process across higher education landscapes. In recent decades, these countries include Australia, China, Hungary, Norway, and South Africa.

In the Australian case, mergers were both directly and indirectly incentivized with the promise of new funds for institutions that consolidated, and a threat of reduced funding for those that failed to cooperate.

Responding to enrolment and funding challenges

Canada’s post-secondary system faces demographic and economic challenges, raising doubts about the long-term sustainability of many institutions.

As Chart 1 shows, government funding remains the largest source of revenue for degree-granting universities and colleges. Although the funding has remained relatively stable over the past decade, post-secondary institutions have become increasingly reliant on tuition fees (domestic and international) as a revenue source.

At the same time, the number of people aged 15–19 has been trending down. This means that post-secondary institutions have a shrinking pool of domestic students to draw upon. (See Chart 2.) This can present challenges in meeting enrolment targets and securing tuition revenue. PSE partnerships or mergers may be motivated by a desire for one or more partners to access new markets or increase total enrolment numbers (and related funding advantages).

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20 Goedegebuure, “Mergers and More.”
21 Harman (Grant), “Institutional Amalgamations.”
22 Curri, “Reality Versus Perception.”
Facing challenges in growing or sustaining domestic enrolment targets, and seeking new sources of revenue, many institutions have significantly increased the number of international student enrolments, (See Chart 3.) Several stakeholders surveyed for this project expressed concern that post-secondary institutions had become too dependent on international tuition fees for revenue. Some felt that external events could disrupt the supply of international students to Canada, potentially undermining the sustainability of institutions. Saudi Arabia’s 2018 decision to recall Saudi students from Canada as a reaction against diplomatic criticism provides an illustrative example.
example. Others felt that risks associated with growing reliance on international students for revenue would primarily be borne by colleges and universities in larger cities like Toronto or Vancouver, which host the greatest proportion of international students.

At least one individual felt that increases in international enrolment merely postponed a need to deal with deeper structural problems in post-secondary institutions, explaining that “the significant increase in international enrolment and the financial flexibility provided by international markets has delayed or deferred some of the financial challenges that might otherwise have forced certain institutions to be seriously thinking about either greater collaboration or mergers.”

Merging for reputation

The reputation of an institution affects its ability to attract top students and faculty; set higher tuition fees; and instill pride and prestige among students, faculty, and community stakeholders. Strengthening or maintaining reputation tends to be a basic goal for post-secondary institutions. And, improving the strategic position of an institution (or institutions) is a common motivator for mergers and other forms of collaboration.

For smaller institutions and those in rural or Northern locations, consolidation through merger can allow for greater visibility within their post-secondary system, whereby, the merged institutions speak with a single voice while representing a larger total number of enrolled students. Greater visibility is also a common motivator in the creation of consortiums, whose members tend to share similar traits and challenges.

Larger institutions may view the acquisition of a specialized school through merger as a step toward a strengthened reputation, particularly where the acquired institution has expertise and stature in its field. The addition of specialized faculty and research infrastructure can further contribute to the reputation of the larger partner.

Challenges for rural and Northern institutions

Financial challenges are often felt most acutely by rural and Northern institutions. Rural and Northern colleges and universities face unique challenges such as smaller populations from which to draw students, less prestige with which to attract students from other regions or internationally, and higher per-student costs due to lack of economies of scale.

In some jurisdictions, funding models respond to these challenges with special purpose grants or funding formulas, providing proportionately higher per-student funding to qualifying institutions. In Ontario, for example, the Small, Northern and Rural Grant (SNR) allocates $61 million to 11 colleges, in addition to the province’s standard College Funding Formula.

23 Chase, “Saudi Arabia Withdrawing Students.”
24 Interview findings (confidential), June 25, 2019.
26 Government of Ontario, “College Funding Model Consultation Paper.”
Without funding, the viability of these institutions may, in some cases, be threatened, necessitating partnerships with other institutions or potentially leading to a merger. (See “Merger: Fairview College and NAIT.”)

In an era of urbanization, and in a large and dispersed country like Canada, attracting talent and providing high-quality post-secondary learning and training programs in rural communities is challenging. While funding models can help compensate for these challenges, some doubt that current funding models are enough to provide rural and Northern students with the same quality of education as those in larger centres.

One administrator at a Northern college felt that investments in programs and infrastructure unfairly favoured large urban centres, which exacerbated the challenge of retaining youth and attracting students to more rural campuses. The administrator argued that, in comparison to urban areas, post-secondary programs in rural areas are not sufficiently valued and resourced by funders, which makes them less attractive to students, and erodes their long-term viability.

Others felt that institutions in rural communities need to be more strategic in their program offerings. Rather than providing a broad range of programs that struggle to secure enrolments, rural and Northern institutions may need to

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**Merger: Fairview College and NAIT**

In the early 2000s, Fairview College in northwestern Alberta faced challenges meeting enrolment targets. It viewed a merger with Edmonton’s Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT) as an opportunity to provide post-secondary students in the region with a wider range of programs, while also ensuring the sustainability of the institution. Administration for Fairview College would later be transferred to Grand Prairie Regional College (GPRC), renaming the merged institution GPRC Fairview College Campus.

For both NAIT and GPRC, specialized programs at the Fairview campus—including Canada’s only authorized Harley-Davidson technician certificate program—provided an incentive to pursue a merger and expand programmatic offerings. In addition, the strengthened reputation and revenue associated with strong regional presence and higher total enrolments were also likely factors motivating the acquiring partner.

Source: The Conference Board of Canada.

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1 MacArthur, “Fairview College to Merge With Institute.”
2 Davis, “GPRC Has Canada’s Only Authorized Program for Harley-Davidsons.”
narrow their scope to focus on programs that respond to regional demand. One expert explained, “What if the government were to redefine this notion that every community needs an all-purpose institution, and move toward a model where every community has an institution that serves some particular interest?”

Placing a Northern or rural institution within a federated/affiliated model could provide remote learners with a broader array of program pathways and learning options, while allowing for regional specialization. However, such a relationship may also lead to dependence on an urban “parent,” without resolving economic and demographic challenges. Given the wide range of circumstances and motivating factors, there is no one-size-fits-all solution.

**Program diversity**

Expanding the quality and scope of programs available to students is a common goal for post-secondary institutions and governments. This can particularly be the case in rural or remote communities where the range of post-secondary programs tends to be more limited than in larger, urban centres. Collaborating or merging with a larger institution can enable a smaller institution to provide new pathways or credentials to students, along with a broader array of programs.

For larger institutions, access to specialized programs—as well as faculty and resources found at the smaller institution—may motivate them to negotiate a merger or affiliated/federated relationship, even when doing so requires the assumption of the smaller institution’s debt.

Where the smaller institution’s academic programs and faculty are of high quality, their acquisition can strengthen the overall reputation of the larger partner.

For a government, ensuring that populations within its jurisdiction have access to post-secondary programs is often a priority. Even where the primary motivation of a forced merger is financial, a desire to ensure that a smaller, specialized institution is able to continue operations implicitly recognizes the value it provides to a region.

Some suggest that a desire for a diversity of programs, and the need to secure cost-efficiencies, are contradictory motivating factors for a merger. In other words, with a broader array of programs, the costs of maintaining faculties and resources, along with associated administrative and governance expenditures, could outweigh any savings resulting from a merger.

One stakeholder suggested that where the financial sustainability of small and rural institutions was in doubt, the provincial or territorial government would need to decide between pursuing a merger or eliminating low-enrolment programs (and thereby reducing the diversity of program offerings): “Which of the two problems does the government want to attack? Do they want the institution to be fiscally viable through some kind of a merger? Or do they want a certain array of programs to be fiscally viable?”

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27 Interview findings (confidential), May 29, 2019.
28 Lang, “The Future of Merger.”
29 Ibid.
30 Interview findings (confidential), May 28, 2019.
Where a merger is being proposed, a desire for a diversity of program offerings may need to be balanced against a desire to lower costs or eliminate low-enrolment programs.
Where a merger is being proposed, a desire for a diversity of program offerings may need to be balanced against a desire to lower costs or eliminate low-enrolment programs. Rarely will decisions around program diversity and cost savings be as binary as the quote above suggests. A funder or an institution may seek to defund unsustainable or struggling programs while maintaining program diversity through more efficient allocation of resources.

**Fools rush in: Keys to a successful relationship**

Mergers are complex, diverse, and distinct: no “one-size-fits-all” approach can ensure success. Planning for the establishment of a new institution through consolidation will be different than planning for the takeover of one institution by another. In either scenario, it is impossible to predict precisely how the merger will proceed and what the outcome will actually look like. Uncertainty is inevitable.

Despite this, several planning considerations can help guide successful negotiations and positive outcomes. In particular, the rationale for a merger—as well as other forms of institutional collaboration—should be clearly articulated. In addition, planning must encompass academic, financial, and human considerations. Through key informant interviews for this project, several themes emerged to help guide successful negotiations.

**Aligning strategic goals**

When discussing a merger or other forms of institutional collaboration, planners must consider the extent to which institutions have complementary goals. Once implemented, mergers are unlikely to be unwound, most obviously because a dissatisfied institution will no longer have the autonomy to decide to reclaim its independence. Ill-defined objectives or problems in the planning and negotiation process, however, may lead to a refusal of institutions to implement a merger, or may undermine its intended impact.31

Experts suggest that any proposal for a merger or formalized partnership ought to be part of a larger strategic plan, and not an isolated tactic or endpoint: “Cost savings or simply being bigger should not be the only, and probably not the primary, drivers of a merger.”32 Where mergers are considered likely to contribute to broader strategic goals, parties should identify the key strengths and best practices of the merging institutions and avoid imposing unilateral decisions.33

If the institutions are motivated by factors that are not aligned, or pursue different visions for the merger, the result can undermine the process. As Lang suggests, “Some mergers fail ... for the same reason that some marriages fail: the partners were incompatible and could not be reconciled. Some mergers that are essentially corporate takeovers fail because they were never intended to succeed; their objective was to eliminate competition and strengthen the dominant partner in the merger.”34

31 Seliga, Sulkowski, and Woźniak, Barriers to University Mergers.
32 Azziz and others, Mergers in Higher Education.
33 Bennetot Pruvot, Estermann, and Mason, Define Thematic Report: University Mergers, 45.
34 Lang, “The Future of Merger.”
Aligning culture and identity

Alignment in the culture of partners is an important additional consideration. Drawing lessons from a series of post-secondary mergers in the U.K., Fielden and Markham identified diverging educational philosophies and priorities, as well as clashing institutional cultures, as possible barriers to successful mergers.

Institutional cultures include notions of custom and tradition, shared values, and symbols. “In organizations and academia, culture is deeply embedded and is not easy to unfreeze or turn off at will.” In a takeover or an amalgamation, opportunities to recognize and honour distinct symbols and traditions of merging institutions can help ease anxieties about the loss of culture.

During the merger of the Nova Scotia Agricultural College and Dalhousie University, for example, a video was released showing the College’s mascot, Rocky the Ram, donning a Dalhousie jersey and partnering with the Dalhousie Tiger mascot to chase away a rival. While the video was fun and lighthearted, it communicated an important message that the merger represented a partnership, and the symbols and traditions of the merged institution would be respected.

The prospect of lost institutional culture and identity is less likely to impact the negotiation of an affiliated or federated relationship. Despite operating within the frameworks of larger institutions, affiliated/federated institutions tend to maintain distinct cultures, symbols, and traditions. One leader we spoke with confirmed: “Certainly, the strong identity that (our institution) has, and has very consciously maintained, is a huge source of strength. By and large, students will identify as students of (the affiliated/federated institution) and identify our institution as a very critical marker of their post-secondary identity.”

The extent to which an affiliated institution maintains a unique identity will vary from one institution to another. However, when an institution is being acquired or amalgamated with another institution through merger, institutional identity is a factor that can potentially hamper implementation processes until a new, merged identity can be established. Institutions with a strong identity or deep historical ties to their community tend to be less supportive of mergers involving a loss of institutional autonomy.

A 2015 study of challenges and success factors in academic mergers (internationally) identified cultural aspects of the institutions as a critical factor. Cultural incompatibility between the merging institutions can both generate reluctance to proceed with a merger and cause organizational challenges following implementation.

35 Fielden and Markham, “Learning Lessons From Mergers in Higher Education.”
36 Harman (Kay), “Merging Divergent Campus Cultures,” 97.
37 Dalhousie University. “Video: Rocky the Ram.”
38 (Confidential) Interview findings, June 4, 2019.
40 Ahmadvand and others, “Challenges and Success Factors in University Mergers.”
Aligning structure

In addition to institutional culture, the organizational structure of institutions is important to consider. Where there is a lack of alignment between institutions, one interviewee compared a potential merger as “trying to affix an aircraft to the side of a house ... it would be a lot harder to integrate.”\(^\text{41}\)

When two institutions are complementary (i.e., not duplicating efforts) in programmatic offerings and governance structures, the expectation is that a merger will proceed more effectively. In contrast, the process is usually more controversial\(^\text{42}\) where emphasis is placed on integration and cooperation among similar programs or fields of study.

Attention to systems and processes

Mergers often struggle due to the practicalities of implementing new systems and business processes. The merging of IT infrastructure, for example, can be costly and time-consuming, but IT infrastructure is often overlooked in merger plans or business cases.\(^\text{43}\)

Beyond IT infrastructure, one individual we spoke with who helped negotiate an affiliation involving a college and university was struck by the range of challenges that emerge in the planning and negotiation process:

“The challenge with (negotiating) was that in order to integrate all of the services and back office stuff that a student would touch, it’s a huge amount of work for the staff from the university and from the college. For example, how many ID cards should a student have? Well they should have one—but try to get one ID card to work on both systems. How do you get the faculty together? Well, the faculty have different collective agreements, they get paid different rates. How do you make that work without having union issues on either side?”\(^\text{44}\)

\(^\text{41}\) Interview findings (confidential), May 27, 2019.

\(^\text{42}\) Skodvin, “Mergers in Higher Education,” 69.

\(^\text{43}\) Jisc, “Technology Implications of Mergers.”

\(^\text{44}\) Interview findings (confidential), May 28, 2019.
The meshing of human resources, administrative support, facilities management, research support systems, and the many other resources common to PSE institutions requires investments in both time for planning as well as the dedication of financial and human resources to plan and implement the consolidation of systems.45

Communication and stakeholder engagement

Experts emphasize that the development of a communication plan is an important step in the merger-planning process. In addition to providing opportunities for stakeholder engagement, it helps to promote urgency and generate awareness and buy-in for the vision and purpose of a merger. Consistent messaging and two-way communication can ease concerns and prevent misinformation. The establishment of a dedicated resource for communications and public relations should be prioritized early in the planning process.46

Engaging faculty and staff in the planning and negotiation process is recommended as a step toward building trust and “buy-in” among stakeholders. Otherwise, as one stakeholder explained, “as soon as you’re outside of the process, it’s very easy to criticize it.”47 It was also cautioned, however, that these processes can be exhausting for participants, and continuity in workflow and academic priorities are important to maintain.

An interviewee who oversaw a takeover merger explained the institution’s approach in building trust among the staff and faculty within the institution that was being absorbed:

“The thing you want to do is build trust, and the first thing that people are afraid of are the jobs. And, of course, they’re afraid of change, because there’s a new administration coming in.... So, I spent a lot of time (at the merging institution) walking the hallway, sitting on the corner of desks, letting people know that I’m a real person, that I’m caring about students, and the survivability of this entity. People thought that we were going to take it over and then sell it or mothball it. They were afraid of those things, and we had to assure them that that wasn’t the case.”48

In small communities, the potential loss of jobs and educational opportunities are likely to be primary concerns for residents. These concerns should be addressed early on, ideally by institutional leadership. In most cases, the result of a merger is not the closure of the smaller campus. Rather, it is a restructuring of governance and, in some cases, programs.

Students are often overlooked in merger processes or the negotiation of collaborative partnerships. There may be a perception that because students are only enrolled for relatively short periods of time, the longer-term trajectory of their institution is not a concern for them. However, mergers have direct and indirect

45 Azziz and others, Mergers in Higher Education, 22.
46 Ibid.
47 Interview findings (confidential), June 7, 2019.
48 Interview findings (confidential), July 25, 2019.
impacts on students. Where two merging institutions have student governments, for example, conversations about governance models may need to be initiated, and students may have justifiable concerns about student services. Students may also have emotional attachments to their institutions, and concerns about the value of their credentials if the issuing institution ceases to exist post-merger.

Stakeholders we spoke to felt that balance should be struck between providing faculty, staff, and students with opportunities to engage in the planning and negotiation process, without requiring them to expend ongoing time and energy. One PSE leader we spoke with felt that an ethical approach to stakeholder engagements should make students foundational to the establishment of new committees and governance structures.

**Alumni** from the merging institution often have strong emotional attachments and may have legitimate concerns about the ongoing value of their credentials. An effective communications plan and outreach strategy should recognize and address such concerns while articulating the rationale for the merger, along with the values and vision for the resulting institution.

Honouring the traditions and history of the merged institution can also help assure students and alumni that the identity and culture of their institution will continue. Symbolic gestures can assist with communications efforts while responding to emotional attachments that individuals may feel.

During and following implementation of a merger, it is important to communicate progress, challenges, and results stemming from the merger. In affiliated or federated relationships, ongoing communication between the institutions can also ensure that smaller partners are engaged as full partners and have opportunities to voice concerns.

Several interviewees we spoke with explained that a merger does not end with implementation, but requires ongoing change management efforts and relationship building through the transition. As one leader said, “I’m constantly managing this merger … and it’s a constant challenge every day. You don’t just say we’re merged. You have to keep working on it. It’s like a marriage.” 49

**Leadership and governance**

Engaging stakeholders in the merger planning and negotiation process is critical. But so too is ensuring that the affected institutions’ leadership is engaged, and that planning is collaborative. As one interviewee put it, “Once you have two presidents who set a strong example, it makes a lot of the rest of it easier.” 50

Jessica Riddell of the Maple League of Universities affirmed that different approaches are needed at different levels of management and administration to build awareness and support for new collaborative frameworks across stakeholder groups. When it comes to faculty, for example, “the approach has to be grassroots, collaborative, co-constructed, and co-designed. The most fruitful initiatives are at the micro-level with partnerships between and among faculty.

49 Interview findings (confidential), July 25, 2019.
50 Interview findings (confidential), May 28, 2019.
and students. But at the meso level, when we ask directors, managers, chairs, and deans to shift mindsets or perceptions, the more effective approach requires clear and consistent support from the macro level—in this case university presidents and senior administrators. Universities have both hierarchical and flat lateral structures, and being attuned to the nuances is key to facilitating institutional culture change.\textsuperscript{51}

An additional area where leadership at the affected institutions plays a significant role is in the planning and negotiating of the governance arrangements for the resulting institution or framework.

Governance arrangements under a merged institution or affiliation/federated agreement can be controversial in negotiation processes. Determining appropriate representation on governing boards and senates of a merged institution can be contentious. Given the potential for governance arrangements to disrupt merger negotiations, it is recommended that they be discussed early in the process.

At a more granular level, disagreements over the filling of specific positions can also lead to breakdowns or failures to implement mergers. In a recent example, a proposed 2018 merger between two universities in South Australia failed as a result of disagreement over who would fill the vice-chancellor’s job in the merged institution.\textsuperscript{52}

In an overview of mergers in American higher education, Azziz and others include leadership as a critical element for merger success. They also suggest that flexibility in the development of governance models is a predictor of merger success.\textsuperscript{53} Recognizing the risk and complexity involved in the merger process, the authors propose that leadership teams may require the involvement of individuals from outside the institutions, and that leaders should consider training and development opportunities to strengthen their transformational skill sets.\textsuperscript{54}

Following the amalgamation of Australian post-secondary institutions in New South Wales in the early 1990s,\textsuperscript{55} staff also highlighted the need

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{51} Interview findings (confidential), August 13, 2019.
\item \textsuperscript{52} Bolton, “South Australia”
\item \textsuperscript{53} Azziz and others, Mergers in Higher Education, 18.
\item \textsuperscript{54} Ibid., 20.
\item \textsuperscript{55} Curri, Gudrun. “Reality Versus Perception,” 139.
\end{itemize}
for specific skills and knowledge to effectively negotiate and implement a merger.

The impact of mergers

Mergers can be difficult to compare. The outcomes of a merger may differ depending on the size of the partners and the objectives or motivating factors. In addition, intended outcomes may not be realized for several years or more, and may correlate with other institutional changes taking place.56

As with any systemic or organizational restructuring, there are costs and benefits. The costs, however, are often overlooked in the period following a merger. In part, this is because there are few incentives for a merged institution to undergo a substantial analysis of whether the process had negative impacts.

Enora Bennetot Pruvot of the European University Association explained, “The potential for mergers to generate actual efficiencies is difficult to assess. There are long lead times when it comes to the implementation of mergers, and the real financial effects of the transformation may take years to become fully apparent. In addition, the rationale and drivers behind the merger are key considerations in the decision on whether to undertake a full ex post evaluation, which might not be seen as necessary or even beneficial.”57

Put another way, once a merger is implemented, there is little incentive on the part of leadership to look back and assess the impact. Doing so may lead to grievances and difficult conversations if the merger (or other framework) has not met expectations. To overcome this reluctance, the establishment of key performance indicators relating to the objectives for merging—measured before and after implementation—is recommended.

An added challenge is that where leadership lacks experience with transformational change, or where merger planning lacks strategic vision, robust assessment and evaluation of a merger’s impact is unlikely.58 As a result, data on mergers in PSE may skew toward successful mergers, where effective leadership and planning have led to successful outcomes (and robust means of measuring impact).

Despite challenges associated with comparing and evaluating mergers, lessons can be drawn from the experiences of Canadian and international post-secondary institutions that have undertaken a merger.

Show me the money

The financial impact of mergers is debated. As addressed in Tim O’Neill’s 2010 Report on the University System in Nova Scotia, there is little or no clear evidence to support the assumption that institutional consolidation yields cost reductions.59 There are, however, significant

56 Williams, “Collaboration, Alliance, and Merger.”
57 Interview findings, Enora Bennetot Pruvot (Deputy Director, Governance, Funding and Public Policy Development, European University Association), June 7, 2019.
58 Stewart, “College Mergers.”
upfront costs involved with enhanced teaching portfolios, the harmonization of IT systems and networks, as well as legal and professional fees associated with mergers.\textsuperscript{60} Even considering savings associated with economies of scale, Fielden and Markham concluded that the only financial savings associated with post-secondary mergers are property-related, including the sale of surplus property and related reductions in maintenance costs.\textsuperscript{61}

Where faculty and staff at merging institutions have collective agreements, a merger will typically retain the more generous of the two. While this reduces anxiety and opposition to a merger for those moving into a more favourable agreement, it can raise overall costs for the merged institution. These costs may be more pronounced in consolidations, where the influx of staff and faculty will be proportionally more significant than it would for a large institution acquiring a small, specialized school.

Some interviewees felt that cost savings could be found if they were identified as a motivating priority for the merger, but not if they were simply assumed among other strategic goals. As one higher education consultant we interviewed explained, “There are only financial benefits if someone says from the start that ‘there must be financial benefits.’ If you just sort of do something and hope that somehow it will save money, it never works.”\textsuperscript{62} Where cost savings are a motivation for a merger, establishing and benchmarking key performance indicators are important to measure impact. Evaluation may need to take place over a long period following a merger, as the impact may not be immediate.

In jurisdictions where mergers have taken place with cost savings as at least a partial motivating factor, the results have been mixed. Between 2012 and 2014, for example, the Scottish Government undertook an extensive restructuring process involving 10 mergers across 27 institutions, driven largely by a desire for financial savings.\textsuperscript{63} In a 2016 evaluation of this process, the Scottish Funding Council found overall quality and responsiveness had improved, and that economies of scale were on track to yield savings. In contrast, Audit Scotland found in 2015 that it was unclear whether savings had been achieved, and that there were insufficient systems in place to collect information.\textsuperscript{64}

### Quality and student experience

Mergers and other collaborative models of PSE partnership have the potential to improve overall educational quality. They do this principally in two ways:

1. Expanding the portfolio of pathways and credentials available to students.
2. Raising the quality of one institution to the standards of another.

\textsuperscript{60} Fielden and Markham, “Learning Lessons From Mergers in Higher Education,” 7.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{62} Interview findings (confidential), May 28, 2019.
\textsuperscript{63} Denholm, “No Evidence College Mergers Have Led to Improvements.”
\textsuperscript{64} Scottish Funding Council, Impact and Success of the Programme of College Mergers.
A United Kingdom survey of 30 mergers found that the benefits of a merger were often greater than anticipated. Focused mainly on instances of takeovers, the survey identified benefits that included an improved academic portfolio for the larger institution, improved academic quality at the smaller institution, and improved governance and greater transparency because of the restructuring process. Mergers in Australia, the United States, and the Netherlands have also been shown to lead to a wider range of multidisciplinary programs.

New academic pathways and opportunities resulting from institutional collaboration can also impact student satisfaction. Affiliated institutions, with their specialized areas of focus and smaller class sizes, may offer advantages over their larger institutional partners. In Ontario, undergraduate students at affiliated institutions are more likely to evaluate their educational experience as “excellent” than those at non-affiliated universities.

Institutional collaboration can improve academic quality in a variety of ways. These include the pooling of talent and infrastructure, improved financial or staffing resources, and a broader range of opportunities for interdisciplinary research. Where the process of merging or creating an affiliated relationship includes program consolidation, the elimination of low-quality programs can also increase overall quality.

As discussed in the Fools Rush In section, the setting of strategic goals to guide a merger or formal collaborative relationship is an important precondition of success in achieving desired outcomes. Maintaining or improving overall educational quality is an important priority.

65 Fielden and Markham, “Learning Lessons From Mergers in Higher Education.”
66 Ibid.
67 Skodvin, “Mergers in Higher Education,” 73.
68 Trick, Affiliated and Federated Universities, 23.
70 Ibid.
The role of government

In Canada, it is difficult to imagine a scenario where a post-secondary merger would take place without the involvement, and approval, of the provincial or territorial governments.

Eastman and Lang confirm that even in voluntary mergers of PSE institutions, the government has both a direct and indirect role.71 For example, financial decisions affecting the funding of public post-secondary institutions may act as a direct pressure for merging. Governments may implicitly or explicitly incentivize a merger or collaboration through funding conditions that reward or discourage behaviour. Targeted grants, for example, are among the most common tools used by governments looking to encourage institutional collaboration.72

Governments may also set limits on how many universities are to be located within a given region, indirectly incentivizing colleges to collaborate with universities in order to provide a wider range of program offerings to students.

A government may also seek mergers as a means of establishing greater control over the direction of its post-secondary institution, and to ensure that institutions are responsive to regional economic and social objectives.73

Where a merger of institutions within a post-secondary system is a desired goal on the part of legislators, a government directive may drive negotiations and planning. The directive may be broad or specific: “In some cases, government may force merger but not determine who the partners should be. In other cases, government may establish strong incentives to merge. Those incentives may be positive—financial inducements are offered—or they may be negative, such as when financial penalties are imposed on institutions that choose to remain independent.”74

Following a directive, individuals we spoke with who had experience negotiating a merger felt that the role of government should be to facilitate discussions between the two merging partners—not seek to control or force negotiations between them. When asked about the role of government, one college administrator felt that “the government has to take the leadership to make the call ... but then it needs to be executed at a very local level, by the local folks. The government needs to get out of the way at that point. Let them make the policy decision, but then let the institutions make the strategic and tactical decisions that make it work.”75

Conclusion and recommendations

When asked about the near-term likelihood that growing numbers of Canadian PSE institutions will engage in mergers or alternate frameworks for institutional collaboration, experts had mixed views. Few, if any, felt that a surge of interest in the merging of institutions was likely to be a national trend.

71 Eastman and Lang, Mergers in Higher Education.
75 Interview findings (confidential), July 25, 2019.
Many felt, however, that institutions were increasingly open to frameworks for collaboration. The emergence of regional consortiums of like-minded institutions, including the Maple League or Atlantic Colleges Atlantique, supports this assertion.

At least one interviewee felt that with greater collaboration, the potential for mergers may grow in years to come: “There certainly has been in the last decade or so considerably more collaboration, interim institutional agreements, college-university pathway agreements.... There’s been a lot more partnerships, or a lot more emphasis on partnership developments. And that will, in my mind, lead to more acquisitions or mergers in the future.”

Responding to demographic change and funding pressures will require PSE institutions to consider new frameworks for collaboration, including potential mergers.

In doing so, our research suggests the following:

- **Be strategic:** A merger or formalized partnership must not be an endpoint, but part of a larger strategic plan, with a clear articulation of vision, goals, and expected outcomes.

- **Identify complementary institutions:** Planners should consider the extent to which institutions have alignment in their programs and infrastructure.

- **Develop a communications plan:** An effective communications plan will help to promote urgency, generate awareness and support for the vision and purpose of a merger or new collaborative relationship, and provide opportunities for stakeholders to offer feedback and engage in the process.

- **Engage stakeholders at all levels:** A top-down approach to planning a merger may lead to stakeholder confusion and opposition to a proposed merger or partnership. Leadership is needed, however, to articulate the vision and purpose of a plan, and to build support and awareness among mid-level managers or administrators. Effort must be made to ensure that stakeholders from the grassroots and leadership levels are engaged when discussing or planning new institutional arrangements.

- **Consider the range of options available:** Mergers are a drastic form of institutional collaboration, resulting in the dissolution of one or more partner institutions. They require significant investments of time and resources to plan and negotiate. Depending on circumstances, other models of institutional collaboration, including affiliation/federation or consortium, may be appropriate.

76 Interview findings (confidential), June 25, 2019.
Appendix A

Methodology

This research involved a literature review of Canadian and international publications. Interviews with 11 individuals were conducted to update the research and fill knowledge gaps. Interviewees consisted of seven subject matter experts (five Canadian, two international) and four senior post-secondary leaders with direct experience negotiating a merger or leading an affiliated partner or consortium. As much as possible, interviewees were regionally represented and gender-balanced. Interviews were conducted over the summer of 2019 and, with consent, were transcribed using voice-to-text software. Except where otherwise indicated, all interviews were confidential and anonymized to encourage candid and critical discussion.
Appendix B

Timeline of recent Canadian mergers in PSE

1991: Westerra Institute of Technology is merged with Northern Alberta Institute of Technology (NAIT).

1991: Ewart College merges with Knox College, University of Toronto.

1996: The Faculty of Education, University of Toronto (FEUT) and the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education merge to form OISE/UT.

1997: The Technical University of Nova Scotia and Dalhousie University merge.

2000: The Government of Alberta assumes control of Alberta College, which is incorporated as a campus of MacEwan University.

2004: Fairview College merges with NAIT. Grande Prairie Regional College takes over administration in 2009.

2004: Augustana University College merges with the University of Alberta (Augustana Campus).

2008: Cypress Hills and Prairie West Regional Colleges merge to create Great Plains College.

2012: Nova Scotia Agricultural College (NSAC) merges with Dalhousie University.
Appendix C

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