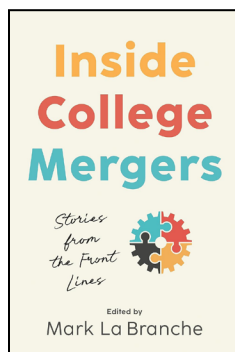


Inside College Mergers: Stories from the Front Lines. Mark La Branche, ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2024. 176 pp. Hardcover, \$44.95, (978-1421448602)



Over the last several years, professionals in academia have grimly witnessed a growing number of colleges and universities across the United States close as casualties of the enrollment cliff and of other strong headwinds disrupting higher education.* In the last two years, this sobering trend has escalated at an alarming rate. For 2023, approximately two colleges per month announced closure or consolidation with another institution. This past spring, that average climbed to one a week.** During this age of contraction, institutions of higher education (especially small private colleges) must be flexible, proactive, innovative, and bold if they hope to avoid becoming another shuttered statistic. In this timely anthology, administrators of several private, nonprofit colleges document their respective institutions' journeys that culminated in mergers or creative partnerships with other colleges or universities and impart practical lessons learned from those experiences.

The institutions featured in this volume include Iowa Wesleyan College, Martin Methodist College (Tennessee), Montreat College (North Carolina), Robert Morris University Illinois, St. Andrews University (North Carolina), Wesley College (Delaware), and Wheelock College (Massachusetts). Apart from experiencing similar challenges as struggling private institutions, these colleges and universities shared little else in common. Though most were faith-based schools, Wheelock and Robert Morris Illinois stand apart as secular institutions. Wheelock and Robert Morris Illinois were located in major cities whereas Martin Methodist and Iowa Wesleyan operated in rural, remote areas. Moreover, the regional diversity between these featured colleges underscores the challenges facing various institutions of higher education across the landscape.

Beyond these varied institutional demographics, each college or university grappled with its own unique set of circumstances and pursued different solutions for long-term financial viability. Innovative partnerships included varied cost and resource-sharing arrangements between institutions. Even among the documented mergers, there are no identical unions. As Mablene Krueger, former president of Robert Morris Illinois wryly observes, "If you've seen one merger/acquisition in higher education, you've seen one merger/acquisition in higher education" (p. 98).

Despite the singularity of every arrangement, however, common themes transcend these differences. At the heart of every case study is the centrality of effective leadership. In these accounts, administrators and board members understood that the status quo was not sustainable. To preserve the missions and legacies of the institutions they served, these leaders were willing to consider bold solutions, take calculated risks, and implement difficult or unpopular decisions—including that most controversial and unthinkable of all: sacrificing institutional independence.

* Higher Ed Dive. (2024, July 1). *A look at trends in college consolidation since 2016*. <https://www.highereddive.com/news/how-many-colleges-and-universities-have-closed-since-2016/539379/>

** Marcus, J. (2024, April 26). *Colleges are now closing at a pace of one a week. What happens to the students?* Hechinger Report. <https://hechingerreport.org/colleges-are-now-closing-at-a-pace-of-one-a-week-what-happens-to-the-students/>

In the coming decades, many colleges will have to forfeit their cherished autonomy if they hope to avoid extinction and extend their mission into the future. Recognizing that mergers are not indictments against administrators' stewardship but transformative opportunities for a consolidated, rebranded institution to continue serving generations of students is a radical departure from traditional leadership philosophy in academia. However unconventional, acceptance of this reality will separate the small colleges that adapt and survive from uncompromising peers that will inevitably close. As Mark La Branche, former president of Martin Methodist College frankly evaluates, "One of the obstacles to 'merger' thinking is in seeing a merger as a failure, or giving up the struggle that our institutions somehow win year in and year out. If we employ 'mission' thinking, then an opportunity to preserve, enhance, and expand the mission becomes a huge win" (31-32).

Throughout the work, authors describe several key elements necessary for ensuring that a union between institutions is mutually beneficial and successful. Paramount of all is proactivity: "Without question, the most important common lesson is that the time to contemplate any form of merger is before it becomes a last resort" (149). Multiple contributors stress the significance of proactively seeking and planning mergers. When administrators are strategic and deliberate in pursuing mergers, their institutions are better poised to secure favorable terms than when reactive campus leaders turn to them in desperation. The sooner administrators of vulnerable colleges begin this process, the better their chances for successful outcomes.

One criticism of *Inside College Mergers* is that multiple contributors cite questionable sources for quotations attributed to famous figures. Robert E. Clark II does this no less than three times in his chapter. While employing thought-provoking quotes to reinforce a concept or position is a timeless rhetorical strategy, such excerpts (as with all other types of information) must be drawn from credible sources. Websites like quotes.net and setquotes.com are not legitimate sources. Given academia's rigorous research standards, it is not unreasonable to expect more from administrators who presumably demand(ed) the best from their students and faculty.

This critique, however, does not detract from the value of the work. *Inside College Mergers: Stories from the Front Lines* provides a timely compilation of case studies that will guide other administrators in leading their vulnerable institutions to more sustainable futures. While college presidents and upper-level administrators will benefit the most from perusing this volume, scholars of higher education will also appreciate this addition to the literature. Academic librarians are encouraged to carefully consider the perspectives presented throughout the work to better understand the challenges their campus administrators may face for years to come. After all, our efforts to advocate for our libraries are most effective when they are guided by informed, realistic expectations. Academic libraries of all sizes, especially those serving small private schools or institutions with higher education graduate programs, should consider adding this title to their collections. —A. Blake Denton, *University of Southern Mississippi*

Cats, Carpenters, and Accountants: Bibliographical Foundations of Information Science,

Wayne de Fremery, MIT Press, 2024. 296 p. Softcover, \$45.00. 9780262547598.

The subtitle of Wayne de Fremery's entry in MIT Press's History and Foundations of Information Science series contrasts its intriguing title. de Fremery, Professor of Information Science and Entrepreneurship at Dominican University of California, is aware of the potential difficulty in engaging readers in a discussion of the relevance of bibliography today.