

## Merging Departments: Dealing with the Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

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Many departments are facing the prospect of a merger with another department. Therefore, APS approached ACDP to conduct a short survey to gain a perspective on how many departments have gone through a merger, what the issues were that they had to deal with during and after the merger, and whether it was seen as a beneficial or detrimental move.

A survey consisting of five questions was emailed to all ACDP members. A total of 84 out of 186 chairs responded, yielding a very high response rate of 45%.

### Merged Departments

Of those Chairs responding, 51 (61%) said their department had not undergone a merger. However, 11 of those 51 Chairs (22%) noted that their institutions had either floated the idea, were considering it informally or formally, or had actually talked about it at a recent point in time. A total of 30 chairs (36%) reported they had undergone a merger and another 3 chairs (3%) said they had undergone a type of merger or partial merger. For the remaining questions, those 33 chairs' responses were combined.

The greatest number of mergers began occurring in the 1990s (11 departments) and continued in the 2000s (19 departments to date; 56%) (Table 1).

### Types of Departmental Mergers

The majority of the mergers were with two other departments: pharmacology (18 departments) and anatomy (11 departments). Also, several mergers involved departments in biochemistry, cell biology, neuroscience, and basic sciences/pre-clinical sciences (Table 2).

### Merger Results: Beneficial or Detrimental?

When departments were asked whether they viewed the merger as beneficial or detrimental to their department, the majority responded that it had been beneficial (19 departments; 58%). In addition, 6 departments noted that their merger had aspects that were both beneficial and detrimental (Table 3).

When asked for more information as to why the merger worked or didn't work for their department, chairs focused on four major areas: departmental culture, research, teaching, and administration.

### Departmental culture issues

Difference in departmental culture between the merging departments was mentioned the most as being the hardest issue to overcome. A few chairs noted the downside of merging, as typified by this comment.

*"It was a disaster. When the deanship again turned over in 2005, the departments were separated again. The problem was that the missions of the two departments were quite different and the faculty had quite different goals. As a result, discussions on allocation of resources, teaching loads, etc became quite divisive."*

The majority of chairs reported that it was possible to deal with the differences and several chairs offered advice on how they overcame them. Many pointed out that strong leadership from the Chair and involvement of faculty from both departments aided in easing the difficulties of the merger.

*"This was a difficult merger, due to the differences in culture and philosophy (but not in the dedication to quality research and teaching) between the groups. Forming divisions allowed each group to focus on continuing special interests, while the new "culture" of the merged department was forming. I initiated several department-wide events and programs that allowed for interactions between faculty and students of the former departments."*

*"Before the merger, each department had their own agendas and*

*areas of emphases with regard to expansion of research programs, commitment to and input on medical school curricular issues, graduate programs, and service – this eventually turned into a strength...."*

*"Even though at first there was much angst over the merger in both departments, over time, the merger has been beneficial.... With proper leadership and compromise from faculty in both departments, as well as institutional support for the new department, the merger can work out exceptionally well."*

*"Prior to the merger, I met with all of the physiology faculty members and allowed them to express their concerns and talked to them about what I would do to help them and what I would expect from them. It helped that I knew all of the faculty members very well and had collaborated with some of them in research. As the Chair of the combined Department, I was very open about departmental decisions, provided the combined faculty with travel to research meetings that wasn't available before, provided more assistance for pilot projects and worked hard to create a feeling of one department rather than two departments with one name."*

*"There were definite difficulties trying to integrate the two groups. One faculty (Physiology) was research oriented, and the other (Anatomy) was poorly funded and primarily oriented toward teaching. Usually, mergers occur between a strong department and a weak department, so there is work to do in developing a constructive environment and utilizing everyone to best advantage."*

*One has to have the mindset that faculty from different departments might have quite different activities and vocational skills. For example in the case of my department, if we are lucky enough to recruit anyone that can teach gross anatomy, the chances*

**Table 1. Year of Merger**

| Years     | No. of Depts | %  |
|-----------|--------------|----|
| 1970s     | 1            | 3  |
| 1980s     | 3            | 9  |
| 1990s     | 11           | 32 |
| 2000-2004 | 13           | 38 |
| 2005-2007 | 3            | 9  |
| 2008-2009 | 3            | 9  |

N=34 (1 department underwent 2 mergers).

that he/she will also be productive investigators are very low. They provide an important service to the department and school, however, so they have to be treated respectfully, rewarded for excellence in teaching and student and service activities, and accepted by the department for their mission. Other faculty members (like those already in Physiology and most of those newly recruited) taught low numbers of hours and were all NIH-funded. People of disparate activities and interests have to be carefully integrated and helped to establish a climate of mutual respect. This is an area where 'academic leadership' is possible and the example of respect set by the chair can make a difference."

"Recognize that evaluation standards (ones used for promotion and annual evaluation) must recognize differences between academic fields, e.g., education and research, molecular biology and behavioral neuroscience."

## Research issues

A few Chairs noted the merger was a detriment to their Department's research program, as typified by the following comment.

"[The merger was] detrimental to research since the primary focus is now on Developmental and Reproductive Biology (including Reproductive Physiology), but this has been done at the expense of the other physiology subdisciplines."

However, the majority of chairs reported seeing their department's research mission expand and increase, even if it took some time to occur.

"Initially the merger was probably detrimental without any additional benefit as areas of overlap in research and teaching were not obvious or, more likely, not looked for. However, at this stage the merger has provided a much stronger Department with more crossover of programs and, in turn, more room for development of new programs."

"Research space is more equitably distributed across faculty in the two formerly separate departments owing to now common guidelines for space allocation. Cross-disciplinary research interactions [were] strengthened owing to more venues for interaction between the formerly separate faculties."

"Scientifically, there's no Pharmacology research without Physiology, and there are very few Physiologists who do not depend on drugs with specific mechanisms of action in their research. It is a continuum, and it is stimulating to get fresh points of view."

"The merger dramatically promoted collaborations between these two groups of scientists and also expanded the knowledge base for each group. It has also broadened the scope of our faculty recruitments."

"I agreed to the merger because I could pick up several unfilled faculty positions and appropriate space. I filled these positions

with research-oriented faculty that helped fill important niches in our intellectual base."

"... we coordinate research directions and have a single graduate program (Neuroscience) rather than each area pursuing their own agenda. This has enabled us to develop critical masses in a limited number of subjects and maintain a cohesive outlook rather than each division pursuing isolated agendas."

## Teaching issues

Chairs commented that teaching can be a potential problem area.

"[You] have to guard against under-/over-emphasis on a particular discipline when providing input for curricular and other issues related to the missions of the school of medicine.

Same [equitable distribution] applies to distribution of teaching and service efforts. However, it is important to note that some faculty view this as a benefit (those who gained from the common vision), while others might view this as detrimental (those who lost space, were asked to increase teaching contributions or otherwise modify their effort distribution, etc). Cross-disciplinary cooperation [is] stronger with regard to medical education issues."

"[It] has weakened the teaching programs for the medical students."

"The big problem: at the Dean's level there is only a limited window (several years) where the merged Department is viewed as 'two combined' Departments. After that, it's just one Department with twice the teaching load. The total number of faculty will be less than if you had two separate Departments, so build in your new hires up front."

"However, this has not been as good an arrangement for the non-neuroscience oriented faculty. This leads to some loss of traditional perspectives (sore point with some faculty), but we try to incorporate aspects of Anatomy, Physiology, and Pharmacology within the Neuroscience curriculum.

However, overall the chairs noted that their Department's teaching programs were strengthened by the merger.

**Table 2. Other Departments Involved in Merger**

| Department Merged With               | No. of Depts | %  |
|--------------------------------------|--------------|----|
| Pharmacology                         | 18           | 41 |
| Anatomy                              | 11           | 25 |
| Biochemistry                         | 3            | 7  |
| Cell Biology                         | 2            | 5  |
| Neuroscience                         | 2            | 5  |
| Basic Sciences/Pre-clinical Sciences | 2            | 5  |
| Animal Health & Biomedical Sciences  | 1            | 1  |
| Biophysics                           | 1            | 2  |
| Communication Disorders              | 1            | 2  |
| Microbiology, Immunology & Biochem.  | 1            | 2  |
| Molecular Biology                    | 1            | 2  |
| Structural & Chemical Biology        | 1            | 2  |

N=44 (if more than one other department was involved in a merger, each was counted individually).

*“Traditional Departments were based on conventional teaching programs in which a single discipline was taught. Now with increasing emphasis on interdisciplinary teaching, a merged Department will be poised to teach in a new style that will become the modus operandi of the future.”*

*“The integrated course is outstanding. More faculty, not fewer, turn out to be needed to put together the medical student course.”*

*“The graduate program is much stronger by allying with the molecular and cellular biomedical scientists than if we had remained isolated.”*

Again, it was seen as important how the chair reacted to and dealt with perceived issues between the faculty of the two Departments.

*“Although in the professional curriculum we still have a traditional division of courses between Anatomy, Physiology, and Pharmacology, we plan and think in a more cooperative manner (no turf wars to justify hours in the curriculum, which are ultimately used to justify numbers of faculty).”*

*“Teaching first year medical students is completely different than teaching second year students. In Pharmacology (second year) the students have been educationally homogenized by their shared coursework in year one, and we can make a whole lot of assumptions about what they have or have not been exposed to. In Physiology (first year) the students are all over the map - some have master’s degrees or PhDs in Physiology, others have never had a basic course in the discipline. It is stimulating to teach in both years and watch this progression. Also, many of my faculty now teach in both years - e.g., Cardiovascular Physiology in year 1 and Cardiovascular Pharmacology in year 2. This makes reinforcing and expanding concepts presented in year 1 easier in the year 2 course.”*

*“We also now have some Pharmacology faculty helping with the Physiology teaching, and I was able to replace the previous*

*Chair of Physiology (who recently retired) with an Eminent Scholar in Physiology and recouped a Physiology faculty position that the previous Chair was not allowed to fill.”*

*“I put the Anatomist who was viewed as the senior and of greatest leadership potential into a position of vice-chair for Education (and pay him more). He organizes all of the courses, faculty committees regarding education, service and school committees regarding education, and end-of-the-year teaching evaluations. He has raised the teaching standards and enthusiasm of all of the departmental faculty about their teaching activities. He is encouraged to be innovative and to coach members of the faculty that are new or having difficulties with language/communication, etc. At this point, our several courses are all highly rated by students and faculty reviews.”*

### Administrative issues

**Costs:** Administratively, with respect to cost savings, there seems to be mixed responses. Many of the Chairs reported no or a minimal decrease in administrative costs.

*“Administrators are attracted to the notion, thinking that significant dollars can be saved. This is most likely not the case. One might save on one or two administrative persons depending on the size of the department but otherwise - it’s really down to how productive each faculty member is in terms of research and teaching. Those numbers (i.e., the number of functioning faculty) remain constant whether coalescence or dispersal is the model of the day. If one creates a large department then subdivisions often arise, each with a “chief.” So how is that cost effective?”*

*“More administration, not less is needed for this to work efficiently. More money is needed to fund the merged Department than the individual Departments.”*

Other Chairs did report reduced administration costs.

*“Dean was able to state to Central Administration that he had reduced administrative positions.”*

*“Having only one Department head reduced administration costs and we were allowed to retain the funds allocated for the other Department head salary, as part of our general operating budget for the merged department.”*

*“We have less administrative overhead and improved efficiencies; just one larger staff instead of three smaller duplicative ones.”*

*“Administrative savings are not that great, but down the road a recruitment package will need to be developed for one chair hire, not two. The College was able to recruit recently a strong chair for [the Department] because of the merger strategy.”*

**Stronger presence in School of Medicine:** Many Chairs noted that a positive factor for merged Departments was having a stronger presence in the School of Medicine.

*“Mostly beneficial in terms of having a much larger critical mass, more resources, larger presence in the Faculty of Medicine.”*

*“Neither Department was large enough to be as effective as was the combined Department.”*

*“The graduate program is much stronger by allying with the molecular and cellular biomedical scientists than if we had remained isolated.”*

On the other hand, several chairs made the opposite observation.

*“[There is the] potential for reduced basic science input to school of medicine / university issues, owing to reduction in votes on Department head councils (the number of basic science Departments has decreased from 5 to 3, owing to mergers of formerly separate basic science Departments).”*

*“Physiology is not as strong in the SOM as if it had been a depart-*

**Table 3. Results of Merger**

| Result      | No. of Depts. | %  |
|-------------|---------------|----|
| Beneficial  | 19            | 58 |
| Detrimental | 2             | 6  |
| Both        | 6             | 18 |
| Not sure    | 5             | 15 |
| No response | 1             | 3  |
| <hr/>       |               |    |
| N=33        |               |    |

*ment because it is easier to dissolve divisions than departments.”*

**Other administrative issues:** Other issues raised by Chairs in merged Departments include faculty input, Chair work load, amount of resources, and location of merging Departments.

*“Larger faculty provides more possibilities for input/discussion on Departmental matters. [However, it means] increased work load for Chair; less time for interaction between individual faculty members and the chair.”*

*“Broader consensus on faculty recruitments and directions for research.”*

*“The combined overhead from the merged Department is four-fold greater than the two individual Departments brought in independently.*

*“One single, important issue remains in full integration of the Department. The two component groups of the faculty are located in the spaces of the former Departments separated on opposite sides of the Medical Campus. To achieve full collegial interactions within the faculty, efficient function, and removal of costly administrative redundancies, it is essential that the Department be located in contiguous space.”*

## Conclusions

Based on the responses and comments received, being involved in a Departmental merger can be beneficial or detrimental, depending on the particular situation and university. However,

by far, most Chairs responding reported that it turned out to be a beneficial arrangement.

In almost all comments, the initial response to the merger was detrimental because neither Department involved wanted the merger or the change that accompanied the merger. Oftentimes the cultures of the two Departments were different, in some cases drastically.

That said, the Chairs who had the most success were those who were willing to involve faculty from both merging departments in the process, make adjustments as needed in terms of faculty responsibilities and evaluation, and work hard to encourage collaborations both in research and teaching.

While mergers are usually not welcome, the good news is that after a few years of adjustment, most are viewed as having been beneficial for the faculty. ❖