A Self-Identified Afro-Caribbean Woman Making It Through a US Higher Education Consolidation Process:
My Story

Dihema Longman

Georgia State University-Perimeter College, USA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Academic consolidations or mergers in higher education institutions have been on the rise. Addressing the human aspect of academic mergers requires delicate attention. However, the unappreciated side of mergers is often the people who deal with the aftermath of the process. Using autoethnography, the author reflects on a recent merger between a community college and a research institute and the author's experience of the lack of attention to the human factor and discusses the value of communicating during higher academic consolidation and merger change processes.

A PUSH TO REFLECT ON A CONSOLIDATION PROCESS

"Don't be afraid. It's going to be ok. You will learn a lot". My daughter, a then 3rd grader, read aloud these words in a letter that she was writing to incoming 2nd graders as part of a class assignment. I looked intently at her and thought, "Wow, out of the mouth of babes truly comes wisdom!" She was communicating to the incoming 2nd graders her experiences and the changes they should expect. As I listened, I thought about how my daughter's words of encouragement would help make the new students feel a bit less anxious and stressed about the transition. I found some of her suggestions quite calming and immediately began to reflect on my transition experience in a higher education experience. What could I write (Richardson & St Pierre, 2005) that might provide some insight and, at the same time, help

me understand why I felt the way I did and how it was affecting my understanding of self as a member of the institutions? (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

I, therefore, embarked on the writing of my story using an autoethnographic approach that promised to empower me as I took ownership of a transitional experience and told of the transformation that transpired during a system consolidation between a two-year college (ADG) and a four-year research institution (RU) in Georgia (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Ellis & Bochner, 2010; Starr, 2010). In Georgia, between 2009 and 2015, the Board of Regents (BOR) conducted multiple layered phases of separate administrative mergers of institutions from 36 to 26. Mergers are strategies that higher education conduct to "reduces the number of separate organizations for which executive responsibility must be taken" and to create new integrated entities (Eastman & Lang, 2001, p. 5; Harman & Harman, 2008). While the term merger is typically assigned to business partnerships, consolidation is used for political reasons associated with academic strategies reducing the number of institutions (Harman and Harman, 2003; Leslie, 2018). Within the paper, I use the terms consolidation and merger interchangeably to share my significant experience of one memorable moment in the state of Georgia's pattern of governance (Azziz et al., 2017).

In my academic career, I use the memorable moment of hearing the consolidation announcement for the first time on the news to discuss the impact of the merger transition on key employees, like myself, and communication efforts (Eastman & Yang, 2001; Ribando et al., 2017). According to Choi (2011), "in a changing situation, employees try to make sense of the new environment and draw conclusions about its possible outcomes by being actively involved in the information seeking, meaning ascription, and assumption making about the change" (p. 481). As a key constituent, I went on the self-inquiry, self-search, and information-seeking journey to learn about consolidations and mergers, to figure out what it meant, and how it informed my future situated as an Afro-Caribbean woman teaching in the U.S academy and culture (Choi, 2011; Ngunjiri et al., 2010; Starr, 2010; Sultan, 2019). Sharing this consolidation experience with readers, decision-makers, and others in similar institutional processes might provide a perspective to put the human factor, key constituents, at the center of communication instead of the margin of these merger strategies (Benton & Austin, 2010; hooks, 2000; Leslie et al., 2018).

REFLECTING ON THE CONSOLIDATION ANNOUNCEMENT

I have, over the years, consciously and unconsciously reflected on this memorable moment within one of the mergers in the Georgia experiment (Azziz et al., 2017; Polanyi, 1958). This reflective acknowledgment of the consolidation allows me to continually refine the knowledge-making process, define my experiences more accurately and ethically and write about them (Biermann, 2010; Ellis et al., 2011). Reflecting on the consolidation process, whenever I see or hear the words merger or consolidation, this is the moment, how it was announced, that comes to mind for me.

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I sit in my living room doing the accustomed thing—listening to the local evening news. My interest peeked as the broadcasting returned from a commercial break and the news reporter stated that the top associate-degree-granting institution in Georgia would "consolidate" with the second-largest university in the University system (USG, 2015). This television news broadcast was my initial engagement and

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