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The clash of campus cultures

Jonathan D Jansen offers insight into the dilemma of merging institutions with seemingly irreconcilable differences

THE legal establishment of mergers was easily accomplished; it merely required a dictate from the Ministry of Education.

The physical merging of facilities, financial and accounting systems, personnel management systems and general infrastructure were more difficult to achieve, but gradually this is also being realised within the merged entities.

What has proven to be infinitely more difficult and complex to accomplish is the merger of institutional cultures.

Here is the conundrum: How do you merge institutional cultures that are not only mutually incompatible, but also mutually undesirable? The incorporation (legally, though not substantially, different from a merger) of the Mamelodi campus of the former Vista University into the University of Pretoria offers important challenges and insights into this dilemma.

When the students from the Mamelodi campus recently moved onto and trashed the main campus of the University of Pretoria, they threw a spanner in the works of an orderly, predictable and well-managed institution. In the process, this rare disruption of institutional order also shone a mirror on two institutional cultures.

In the case of the Mamelodi campus, the event betrayed an institutional culture which over the years had allowed students to threaten, disrupt, undermine and destroy a university campus

environment whose management tried, in vain, to eject those who failed to pay and perform.

If this was simply a matter of ability to pay, the problem would probably be resolved given the volume of financial aid available to black students who excel in their studies; but in this case, it was typically students who year-after-year failed to make progress with their academic studies who were demanding unqualified access to campus irrespective of academic performance and progression.

Over the years, the students would routinely beat weak management into submission, regain access to the Vista campuses, agitate for the "pushing up" of marks to the 50-minimum and, if this failed, they would simply show up again at the beginning of the year to create havoc and make a mockery of policies misleadingly called "academic exclusions".

In the case of the University of Pretoria, the trashing of the main campus provoked about 200 young, white Afrikaner males into action, who decided to protect "their" campus, march in military formation, sing the old *Die Stem van Suid-Afrika*, and create what could have been one of the most explosive racial confrontations in the post-1994 period.

These young white males had accomplished something much more important on the day: they had betrayed the fact that just below the surface of order and *ordentlikheid*, there still lurks racially offensive attitudes,

structures and behaviours that could, at the slightest provocation, bubble to the surface and provoke racial tension and conflict. These students helped explain why the culturally exclusive ox-wagon continues to mark the emblem of Tukkies; why men dominate management; why black students and staff insist on describing their experiences in terms of alienation and exclusion from the cultural and social mainstream of the campus.

Despite enormous progress in terms of transformation on the Tukkies campus over the past decade, these students betrayed a campus culture that still struggled with matters of race, culture, identity and change.

How does one merge two such different campuses, each with their own pathologies?

The first thing is for university leadership to condemn and outlaw the destructive behaviour of black students and insist on academic performance as the sole criterion

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for financial aid. At the same time, and with equal hand, such leadership should condemn and outlaw the racist behaviour of white students.

Where students step over the line through either racial provocation (in the case of white students) or the destruction of public property (in the case of black students), such behaviour should lead to automatic disciplinary proceedings and expulsions from campus life. Where institutional leadership does not act firmly, consistently and fairly on both sides of the racial divide, there is no reason to believe that such regressive behaviour will not return with a vengeance.

The second thing to do is to recognise and then build on the positive value brought to mergers and incorporations by each campus culture; that is, to look beyond the dramatic and disruptive displays of student power and identify the affirming aspects of the two institutional cultures.

In the case of the Mamelodi campus of the former Vista

University, students have developed a sense of their rights as institutional stakeholders, they have developed profound political and organisational skills, they are articulate about conditions of disadvantage, and they are perfectly capable of engaging senior leaders of institutions on a range of student concerns.

In the case of the University of Pretoria, the institution has developed one of the most impressive managerial cultures in South Africa. No university that I know of has more competent management systems, stronger financial capacity, better infrastructure for student support, and greater willingness to change.

When what is bad is condemned and what is good is reconciled, then the combination of institutional cultures could yet make these mergers work. It will, however, require extraordinary and exemplary leadership.

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