



Dynamics of Merging Two Major U.S. Universities

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Acquisition and Merger: Considerations and Decisions

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Acquisition of Northcentral University by National University System





- Founded in 1971 by US Navy veteran, Dr. David Chigos as a nonprofit adult learner and military-focused institution.
- Accredited by Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) since 1977.
- Total Fall 2022 (pre-merger) enrollment of 18,631 (IPEDS).
- NU is largest Hispanic-Serving Institutions (HIS) in California.
- NU developed as Bachelor's and Masters' degree-focused institution, first offering online programs in 2000.
- Already 95% online prior to COVID Pandemic and became 99% online during Pandemic, except for programs leading to licensure such as Nursing.
- **National University System (NUS)** created as Type II support organization for NU and other NUS affiliate institutions including City University of Seattle and John F. Kennedy University.



NCU
Northcentral University

- Began in 1996 as a disruptive-innovation – a wholly online graduate and doctoral institution with 1:1 instructional model devoted to adult learners traditionally underrepresented in doctoral education.
- Model has served students well and university experienced steady growth with superior student retention and graduation outcomes.
- Tax Status: for-profit-institution. Became a non-profit institution in 2019 when acquired by National University System (NUS)
- Total 2021 pre-merger enrollment: 12,648 students.
- Initially accredited by Higher Learning Commission (HLC).
- Relocated headquarters from Arizona to San Diego in 2015 and subsequently accredited by WSCUC.
- NCU dramatically expanded doctoral program portfolio post-WSCUS accreditation to increase marketability as an acquisition.
- Innovations already developed at NCU intended from outset to be incorporated into academics and operations as part of the merger and coalescing of the two institutional models.

Background of Acquisition and Merger

- In 2018 Board of Trustees (BOT) began project **Path 3-2-1** and brought in former WSCUC President, Dr. Mary Elie Petrisko to consult with BOT and help conceptualize plan to transform National University into a unified, world-class institution that would have the scale to be sustainable.
- From beginning, plan was to reduce multiple institutions to a single unified institution that would meet needs of adult learners at multiple degree program levels and allow them to progress to meet their goals.
- NU BOT long interested in expanding programmatic portfolio of NU to include more doctoral programs; Ed.D. in Organizational Innovation established in 2019.
- After unsuccessful first round of negotiations, NUS successfully acquired NCU in 2019 upon approval of a change of control and acquisition proposal by WSCUC.
- As part of change of control and acquisition by a non-profit entity, NCU recognized by WSCUC as not-for-profit institution and applied to US Department of Education for recognition as a non-profit.

Background of Acquisition and Merger

- Another part of change of control and acquisition was formation of a for-profit third-party service (TPS) organization from the previous operations side of NCU, called National Education Partners (NEP) that had own Board of Directors, reported directly to NSU Chancellor, and executed service-level agreements with both NCU and NU as a requirement of WSCUC.
- As first step in consolidation envisioned in PATH 3-2-1, NUS affiliate John F. Kennedy University was deemed not financially viable by the BOT, was closed in 2020, and its signature programs absorbed by other NUS institutions; School of Law by NCU, PsyD and other School of Psychology programs by NU.
- Next step for BOT was to consider how to move the system forward into a more competitive stance, under PATH 3-2-1 the unification/merger of NCU and NU came into sharp focus.
- On July 30, 2021, the BOT resolved to merger NCU and NU while at same time a merger proposal was submitted to WSCUC to merge NCU and NU as the surviving institution.

Organizational Transformation Initiative



Transformation

- Concurrent with creation of WSCUC proposal between NCU and NU, the BOT entered into consulting contract with McKinsey consulting firm to assist merging institutions to become a sizeable and scalable among large online institutions.
- After extensive and rigorous evaluation completed in partnership with McKinsey, the NUS Board of Trustees and senior leaders of all NUS affiliates developed a strategy to advance the NUS mission by four goals:
 - (1) Drive operating excellence to deliver a superior student experience.
 - (2) Develop a broad portfolio of new and career-relevant programs.
 - (3) Build a national brand that increases interest in attending our institutions and drives enrollment.
 - (4) Innovate the way we help students explore and pursue new careers.
- To operationalize this transformation, several new senior administrators were hired, a new Transformation Office was created, and a 12-18-month timeline was created.

Unite Transformation Journey

Our purpose is to transform the lives of our students through higher education

CASE FOR CHANGE

The world we live in is rapidly changing around us & so are the needs of our students.

New competitors are emerging and adult learners have more choices than ever

The status quo is not enough to get us or our students where we need to be in the future.

UNITE TRANSFORMATION

We need to transform how we teach, what we teach, how we support learners & how we support each other.

OUR GOAL

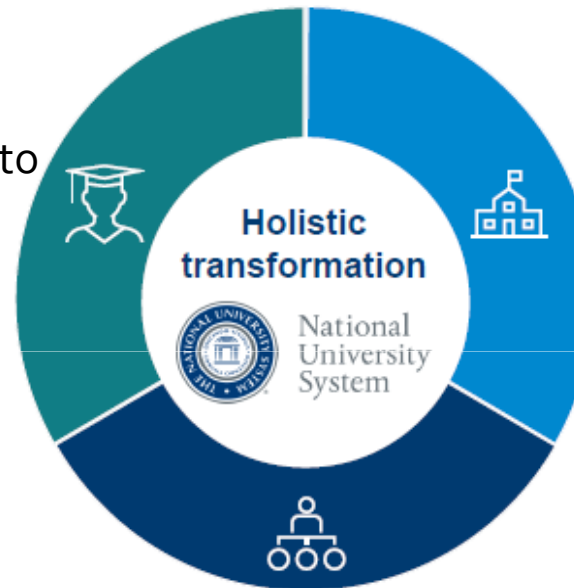
To be a best-in-class university that is more inclusive, flexible, and accessible for adult learners, serving even more students from coast-to-coast.

The Unite Transformation

To continue to thrive and serve our students in the best way possible, we need to transform how we teach, what we teach, how we support learners on their journey and how we support each other.

1.

Expand access to higher education to working adults.



2.

Drive transformational student outcomes.

3.

Build strong organizational health.

Transformation

- A key tenet guiding the transformation was notion of bottoms-up-planning (BUP) that was conceptualized, and realized, as series of initiatives proposed by staff and faculty, then validated and accepted by the Transformation Office, and assigned a specific workstream, monitored by WAVE through to full operation.
- The BUP phase intended to occur between mid-August to mid-October 2021, commencing shortly after the submission of the NU-NCU merger proposal to WASCUC. Specific workstreams for the Transformation initiatives are listed on the next slide.
- Over 150 initiatives were identified through BUP process intended to further progress on Goal 1 of the transformation over succeeding months, many of which were implemented and completed. Overwhelmingly, the initiatives concerned business process improvements, using gains in effectiveness, efficiency, and cost savings and/or revenue generation as metrics.



Merging of Northcentral University and National University



■ Gaining WSCUC and US Department of Education Approval for the NU-NCU merger

- While transformation initiatives were still playing out, a substantial number of difficulties arose in gaining WSCUC and US Department of Education for the merger, primarily due to unanticipated, and not fully documented, change in US Department of Education merger approval process from a one-step process to much longer two-step process.
- **July 2021:** Structural change proposal submitted to WSCUC.
- **November 2021:** Original merger proposal from WSCUC resulted in creation of a structural change review panel and meeting of NU and NCU personnel with WSCUC panel. Following the panel meeting, the panel found necessary to receive the outcome of the US Department of Education's review of the 2018 Change of Ownership and Legal Status for NCU prior to further consideration of the proposal.
- **December 2021:** Letter of approval received from US Department of Education's review of 2018 Change of Ownership and Legal Status for NCU, allowing merger proposal to move forward. Submitted to WSCUC in March 2022 along with requested updates to original proposal.

Gaining Approval for the NU-NCU merger

- **April 2022:** Following deliberation by Structural Change Panel, WSCUC communicated that requirements of US Department of Education for NCU to retain its existence for purposes of Federal Financial Aid were not consistent with WSCUC standards and criteria for accreditation; Structural Change Panel voted not to accept the proposal.
- **Late April 2022:** Following quickly-arranged meeting at WSCUC Accreditation Resource Conference, WSCUC substantive change panel voted to proceed to virtual site visit for the proposal and requested further information.
- **May 25, 2022:** Substantive change site visit took place and team report received shortly after.
- **June 24, 2022:** Following deliberation, WSCUC voted to approve NU-NCU merger, nearly one year following original submission.
- **November 1, 2022:** NU and NCU formal merger takes place.



School and Department Considerations and Decisions

Dr. Joseph Hoey, Assistant Chief of Staff, Vice President for Assessment & Accreditation

Dr. Robert Lee, Dean Sanford College of Education (SCOE)

Dr. Brianna Parsons, Director Virtual Education Support Center

Dr. Natasha Ferrell, Program Lead, MS School Psychology

Merging Guidelines and Processes



Merging Approaches to Assessment and Academic Program Review:

Two Institutions Separated by a Common Language

- After submission of original NU-NCU merger proposal, NU and NCU administrators with responsibility for assessment and academic program review began to work to craft a single blended solution to two areas required by WSCUC and common to most universities and colleges:
- (1) Program-level assessment of student learning outcomes annual reporting
- (2) Periodic in-depth review of academic programs
- Both institutions had substantial well-documented and effective systems in place for both require processes, there were major differences in software used and university structures in place.
- **Key Difference 1:** NU used an Assessment Management System (AMS) called "TaskStream" for over a decade while NCU had used another AMS called "Anthology" for several years.
- **Key Difference 2:** The models used, and university structures put in place, for annual assessment reporting differed substantially between NU and NCU.
- **Key Difference 3:** The models used, and university structures put in place for periodic academic program review differed substantially between NU and NCU.

Merging the Two Systems

- **Step 1:** Create a common understanding of all elements involved with finalization by Deans and Provost identifying exactly which programs were to belong in school and then creation of large spreadsheet for each program.
- **Step 2:** Create process timelines with Planning November 2022 - December 2023, Implementation beginning January 2024, and Initial Due Date of December 2024.
- **Step 3:** Bring to Educational Effectiveness Committee of the Academic Affairs Council.
- **Step 4:** Do collaborative input and needs assessment process.
- **Step 5:** Co-create the new handbook.
- **Step 6:** Bring to Academic Affairs Council for approval -- (Approved at December 2023 Academic Affairs Council meeting).

Dean's View of Merging Guideline

Developing a New Unified Culture

Continued Evolution

- Developing a new unified culture is an ongoing process that requires time, patience, and commitment from leadership, faculty at all levels.
- Regularly assess the cultural climate and adjustment as needed to ensure a successful integration.

- Flexibility
- Create a "Culture of Care"
- Naming, Calling-out Trauma
- Understanding each other's identity
- Transparency 'always' and in 'all ways'

Duplication of Schools: SCOE & SOE

Merging of two Schools of Education

"Where to Put NCU SOE?"

- Became Department of Advanced Graduate Studies within NU's Sanford College of Education
- Housed all 1:1 programs, faculty, and students
- Concurrent crosswalk of all programs to determine overlap
 - Recommendations to sunset/teach out duplicates
- Two separate instances of:
 - LMS
 - SIS
 - Advising/Enrollment
 - Registrar

Duplication of Schools: SCOE & SOE

Merging of two Schools of Education

- Two schools of education existed in the pre-merged state: Legacy NU – Sanford College of Education (SCOE), and Legacy NCU School of Education (SOE)
 - **SCOE** focus: Undergraduate and master's degrees and an Ed.D. degree program
 - Focus on California Administrative and Teaching Credentials
 - **SOE** focus: Doctoral (EdD and PhD) programs, with some Master's and Ed.S. degrees
 - Specializations in each degree level
 - Post-baccalaureate & post-master's certificates
 - MAT degree

Integrating Faculty, Staff, and Academic Programs

National University

Mission and Vision



Mission

To deliver accessible world-class student experiences by providing quality programs and services that ensure student success through meaningful learning.



Vision

To be an inclusive and innovative university **serving lifelong learners who contribute to the positive transformation of society.**



National University

Ways of Working Utilized to Build Capacity and Integrate Faculty & Staff



**Champion
Student
Success**



**Build
Trust**



**Advance
Inclusion**



**Embrace
Accountability**



**Make Things
Better**

Dean's view of Integrating Faculty, Staff, and Academic Programs

- Balanced Leadership with Dean's Cabinet representative of NU/NCU
 - Department Structure
 - Program Placement
 - Duplicated Programs (i.e., merge or sunset)
- Develop Cross-Functional Teams
 - Promote Inclusivity and Inclusive Decision Making
 - Shared Goals and Objectives
 - Communication Strategies
- Creating our Identity Together
 - SOAR Mindset
 - Openness to Make Adjust and Changes
- Celebrate Together

Program Lead's Perception of Integrating Faculty

Change Champion Network

Promoting communication and transparency

"The Change Champion Network plays a vital role in driving and cultivating a positive experience throughout Unite National Transformational journey and beyond."

Change Champion Network Onboarding 2022

- Composed of NU faculty and staff at all levels of the Organization
- An extension of the Transformation Team
- Roles and Responsibilities
 - Advocate for change within
 - Communicate, encourage, and motivate
 - Conduit for bidirectional information sharing and feedback
 - Support Peers

Guiding Principle of Change Champion Network

"If you're guided by a spirit of transparency, it forces you to operate with a spirit of ethics. Success comes from simplifying complex issues, address problems head on, be truthful and transparent."

- - *Rodney Davis*

Change Champions Network

Supporters, Mentors, Advocates, Communicators, & Connectors

Building Capacity for Change

- Various collaborative "pulse checks" and trainings
- Review of key messages and upcoming events
- Ongoing progress monitoring and opportunities to provide feedback
- Leadership and communication training for Change Champions
 - Empathy mapping
 - Cultivating Trust
 - Communication and Engagement
 - Building Comfort with Ambiguity

Change Champion Networks

Addressing Concerns and Building Trust

Change Champion Experience within SCOE

- Focused on transparency through ongoing and regular communication from leadership
 - Change Champions able communicate concerns of constituents to leadership
- Validated feelings of uncertainty
- Provided a safe space to voice concerns
- Identified common concerns, areas for growth, and strategies that worked
- Gave faculty a voice
- Over time, saw a shift from fears/concerns associated with merger to more interest in impact on "day-to-day" operations based on mergers from stakeholders

Integrating Faculty, Staff, and Academic Programs

Planning for new faculty post-merger

ASPEC Department

- Ongoing discussion between department chair and ASPEC program leads regarding appropriate placement for NCU faculty
- Careful review of program training standards and credential requirements to determine best fit between program and faculty
- After consultation and review with various stakeholders, including NCU faculty, appropriate placements identified

Integrating Faculty, Staff, & Academic Programs

School Psychology Program Overview

NU's School Psychology Program

- Three-year year-around program; 90+ unit program
- Cohort, class-based model
- Hybrid model with online and onsite classes
- Adheres to CTC credential requirements and aligns with National Association of School Psychology (NASP) training standards.
- Curriculum prepares candidates across a variety of disciplines and content
 - Cognitive, academic, social-emotional, behavioral, special populations assessment
 - Research methodology and program evaluation
 - Consultation and collaboration
 - Academic, behavior, and social-emotional intervention
 - Mental health, crisis response, and prevention
 - Ethics and educational law
 - Counseling

Integrating Faculty, Staff, & Academic Programs

Onboarding new faculty members

School Psychology

- Two faculty members identified for school psychology program
- Department chair facilitated first meeting
- Ongoing meetings between program lead and new faculty members before introduction to broader team
- Began attending weekly program meetings a month after initial meeting

Integrating Faculty, Staff, & Academic Programs

Integration of new faculty into program

Roles and Responsibilities

- Collaborated with faculty members to identify areas for program support
 - Teaching and instruction
 - Research support
 - Mentorship and professional development
 - Course development
 - Advising
- Challenges
 - Balancing teaching load
 - Scheduling
 - 1:1 model vs. Class-based model




Faculty Perspectives: Considerations and Decisions

Dr. Belle Booker-Zorigian, Associate Professor, Sanford College of Education

Dr. Sidney Castle, Professor, Sanford College of Education

Merging Teaching Philosophies & Instructional Resources & Supports



Different Teaching Philosophies

Merging Instructional Approaches & Faculty Expectations

Legacy NU	Legacy NCU	Merged & United NU
4 & 8 week cohort-based courses Majority Masters with some Undergraduate and one Ed.D. Program	8 week & 12 week 1:1 courses Majority doctoral	4 & 8 week cohort-based courses and 8 & 12 week 1:1 courses Undergraduate, Masters, & Doctoral
Weekly cohort-based dialogue, discourse, & discussion board questions	Weekly personalized dialogue, discourse, & discussion with instructor; The Commons	Both approaches, dependent on course type
Weekly optional cohort-based live interactive zoom teaching & discussion sessions	Personalized 1:1 zoom sessions with individual students 2 times each 8 or 12 week course	Both approaches, dependent on course type
Weekly instructor office hours	Weekly instructor office hours	Weekly instructor office hours
Faculty Handbook, Departmental Faculty Online Instructor Expectations Guide	Teaching Through Engagement Model (TTE)	Faculty Handbook, TTE, Departmental Online Instructor Expectations Guide
Weekly feedback & grading; assignment rubrics aligned to CLOs & PLOs Instructors can "customize" courses By providing supplemental handouts	Weekly interactive feedback TTE model, signature assignment rubrics aligned to PLOs and ILOs.	Both approaches; working to merge assessment practices & improve rubric alignment & completion across course both modalities

Different Teaching Philosophies

Merging Instructional Approaches: Personal Observations

Faculty Roles, Expectations, and Limitations

- **NU Legacy Courses**
 - Interact with cohort class as a whole and respond to individual students during office hours
 - Difficult to establish mentoring relationships since only interact with cohort class members in one or two courses

- **NCU Legacy Courses**
 - NCUTTE philosophy means that in 1:1 class, faculty function as instructor, mentor, and sometimes as advisor
 - In 1:1 TTE course instructor can adjust instructional style to match needs of individual student

Different Instructional Resources

Merging Faculty & Student Supports

Legacy NU	Legacy NCU	Merged & United NU
Faculty onboard training cohort-model	Faculty onboard training 1:1 model Faculty Coaching	Tier 1, 2, & 3 training cohort and 1:1 modalities NCUOne and DSE/ADE training
Student Success Center, Writing Center, Math Center	Academic Success Center ASC	Academic Success Center ASC
Center for Innovation & Learning	Center for Teaching & Learning	Academic Training Academy
Course Instructor Resources, Job Aides, Student Learning Support, Libguides	Course Resources, Faculty Teaching Guide, Commons, ASC, Libguides	Course Resources, Faculty Teaching Guide, Commons, ASC, Graduate Studies Support Center (GSSC), Libguides

Different Instructional Resources

Faculty & Student Supports: Personal Observations

Faculty and Student Supports Contrasted

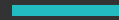
■ NU Legacy Courses

- Faculty teaching Cohort courses receive instruction and mentoring as needed from Course leads
- Faculty can easily add additional handouts that only impact the specific course section being taught
- Faculty teaching dissertation courses have more latitude working with students both in terms of deadlines and development of dissertation components
- Dissertation Students and the Chair consult and can invite faculty members and outside experts to form the student's Dissertation Committee

■ NCU Legacy Courses

- Almost all course authors provide Faculty Teaching Guides, including in the statistics research courses the correct answers to each assignment to aid instructor grading
- Courses have clearly stated weekly assignment due dates and specific assignment expectations
- Dissertation courses have very specific requirements for each dissertation component; example of Problem of the Study limited to 200 to 300 words with few exceptions
- Dissertation students are assigned a Chair, a Subject Matter Expert, and an Academic Reader
- Dissertation students are provided multimodal feedback each week of each dissertation course

Developing Collegial Relationships



Unifying Faculty & Developing a Collegial Culture

Avoiding Merger-related Faculty Pitfalls

- Falling victim to cultural clash and faculty friction
- Resistant to new university mission and vision resulting from loss of institutional identity
- Succumbing to rumor mill, "water cooler" or "teacher lounge" negative talk
- Having a fixed mindset:
 - "I know better than others."
 - "I only teach X students"
 - "This won't last."
- Becoming complacent in teaching methods and student mentorship
- Avoiding opportunities to improve your own instructional or scholarship practices
- Not communicating with or leaning on colleagues and leadership for support and guidance

Unifying Faculty & Developing a Collegial Culture

Embracing Opportunities for Faculty Growth

- Learning new modalities for instructional delivery
 - 1:1 faculty teaching in cohort model
 - Cohort faculty teaching in 1:1 model
- Retooling instructional strategies to meet needs of different student populations
 - Feedback delivery for doctoral students retooled for undergraduate students
 - Holding group zoom sessions focused on a specific topic
- Breaking outside your comfort zone
 - Teaching undergraduate students for first time
 - Acting as a subject matter expert for Legacy NCU doctoral committees
- Collaborating on curriculum development and continuous improvement in assessment
- Sharing responsibility and accountability for student learning
- Seeking out expertise and sharing your own expertise
 - Leaning on colleagues and leadership for support
- Collaborating on scholarship and service opportunities
 - Presenting and/or publishing together
 - Co-leading a committee
- Utilizing faculty and student resources and supports
 - Academic Success Center, Tier 1-3 training

Tiered level faculty training

Examples of Positive Collegial Interactions

- **EEC Committee**

- Committee charged with developing a handbook and rubrics for the annual and 5-year review of all NU programs, both 1:1 and Cohort, consisting of faculty and administrative personnel from both NU and NCU Legacy programs who worked smoothly and cooperatively to develop the finished product while demonstrating the spirit of moving forward with a new single university focus.

- **NU's Sanford College of Education (SCOE) Monthly Meetings**

- SCOE Dean begins each meeting asking for faculty volunteers to read NU Mission and Goals statements and provide examples from the previous month. Volunteers have consisted equally of NU and NCU Legacy faculty members whose examples describe instances of collegial actions to resolve issues and reach goals

- **Merged Faculty Teaching both 1:1 and Cohort courses**

- Daily examples of faculty from both NU and NCU Legacy programs volunteering assistance and mentoring to faculty assigned to teach courses in the other program

- **Development of this Presentation**

- This presentation is the result of two faculty members, one NCU Legacy and the other NU Legacy, who were collaborating on research ideas and co-jointly developed the proposal and this presentation as a way of demonstrating merged faculty collegial efforts. As the initial proposal was further developed, NU and NCU Legacy Administrators and Program Leads joined the effort demonstrating the commitment and collegial spirit of both groups as we move forward with a new single university focus.

Discussion & Audience Questions

