

Consultants advise: Partnerships the way to go

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In the new higher education math, one plus one often equal much more than two, consultants advised in their initial meeting with the leadership of Alfred University and Alfred State College. The two institutions, located literally across the street from each other in Alfred, NY, in May announced they were exploring a possible merger, but "merger" is not the best way to describe what will result, said Dr. James Samels, a partner in Education Alliance, a Boston-based consulting firm that has been involved in some 35 partnerships between colleges and universities over the past 20 years. "Because of the pervasive corporate culture, 'merger' has taken on some very negative meanings to the general public," Samels said. "What you really want to achieve is a partnership or alliance for mutual growth and benefit, creating a situation where the sum is greater than the parts." Samels and Dr. James Martin, who also visited Alfred as part of the four-person team, are authors of "Merging Colleges for Mutual Growth," published in 1994 by John Hopkins. They also authored an article for the Chronicle of Higher Education (May 17, 2002), entitled, "We Were Wrong, It's Not Mergers, It's Partnerships." "What you have here at Alfred is a rare opportunity to create a national model for collaboration and mutual support," Samels told the administrative teams of the two institutions at the conclusion of the team's initial two-day visit to the two campuses. The first phase, which began with their visit to Alfred and could last three to six months, is to determine if there is a basis for the two institutions to work together in a way that is "mutually beneficial, that serves the missions of the two schools, allowing them to work together effectively," said Samels. After talking with more than 130 people, including faculty, students and alumni, as well as the administrative teams of both institutions, the consultants said they would prepare a report by the end of the summer that would outline various scenarios for achieving a mutually beneficial "strategic partnership" for Alfred State and Alfred University. The senior leadership, as well as the Alfred University Board of Trustees and the Alfred State College Council, will review the proposals to determine which, if any, is the most viable means of achieving their goals. If they concur, the process moves forward. "At that point, you should begin broad community discussions about how a partnership might actually occur, and what the timetable might be," Samels said. "We are not going to rush with our proposals, and you shouldn't rush your discussions," he advised. "When we talk about such undertakings, we need to talk in terms of years, not months." "I was encouraged by what the consultants had to say to us," Dr. William D. Rezak, president of Alfred State College, said Thursday. "From the beginning, we agreed that this partnership would not and could not proceed unless it was in the best interests of the students at both institutions. I think, with the consultants' help, we will be able to achieve that." Samels suggested that a partnership or alliance between Alfred University and Alfred State College would give them both an opportunity to get better at what they do. "I see some exciting possibilities for innovative educational programs and a broader range of choices for all students," said Samels. It's particularly true because the academic mission of the two institutions is converging, Samels noted. Alfred State College, which began as a state-supported unit of Alfred University in 1908, became a state agricultural and technical college, offering two-year associate's degree programs, when the State University of New York system was created in 1948. Over the past decade, Alfred State College has been evolving into a college of technology, offering increasing numbers of baccalaureate (four-year) programs in areas with a heavy emphasis on technology. While Alfred State hopes to maintain enrollment at its current level of 3,200 to 3,400 students, more and more of those students will be enrolled in four-year programs rather than associate's degree programs. "By working together, with expanded joint marketing programs and sharing of resources, both institutions have the potential to become even stronger than they are now," said Rezak. "Within this small village, we are able to meet the educational needs of broad range of students, from those who want an associate's degree to those who are pursuing a Ph.D. That's unique, and that's something we need to really emphasize. We're not talking about reducing access to quality education, but rather, expanding it." From the beginning, Rezak and Dr. Charles M. Edmondson, president of Alfred University, established economic development as a goal. "With the type of strategic partnership we are talking about, we will have much more of an impact on the regional economy," said Edmondson. "We will be in a much better position to attract state and federal grants, and to undertake the kinds of innovative research that both leads to spin-off companies and attracts new businesses and industries to a region in need of new jobs."