

Consultants to lead Alfred State, Alfred University merger discussions

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Consultants who specialize in helping colleges merge for what they call "mutual growth" will make their first visit to Alfred this week to initiate possible merger discussions between Alfred University and Alfred State College. Dr. James Martin, Dr. James E. Samels, and their associates from the Education Alliance, a Boston-based consulting firm specializing in educational mergers and consolidations, will be conducting initial planning meetings Wednesday and Thursday involving the presidents and top administrators from both campuses, Alfred State College President William D. Rezak and Alfred University President Charles M. Edmondson announced today. Exploratory meetings have been scheduled on each campus with groups of faculty, students and alumni as well. During their two-day visit, the consultants may be meeting with as many as 100 people. Rezak and Edmondson said they selected the Education Alliance to assist with the discussions because the firm has guided more than two dozen successful educational mergers since its formation in 1989. The Education Alliance advocates "mutual growth mergers," which they describe as "merger plans based on the mutual growth and enhancement of the missions of both institutions," a philosophy Rezak and Edmondson say matches their goal for the talks between Alfred State College and Alfred University. "We were impressed with the consultants' broad experience, and their concern for individuals and their common sense," said Rezak. "We're looking for a win-win situation here," said Edmondson, "and we have asked Dr. Martin and Dr. Samels to help us determine if there is an organizational structure that will allow our two institutions to improve and grow stronger together as one new entity." Rezak and Edmondson simultaneously announced to their campuses in late May that the two institutions would begin talks this summer on a possible "reconnection" between the two schools. Alfred State College actually got its start in 1908 as a state-supported unit of Alfred University, which was founded in 1836. When the State University of New York was established in 1948, the decision was made to make what was then the agricultural school at Alfred University into the nucleus of the New York State Agricultural and Technical College at Alfred, also known as Alfred State College. In making their announcements, Rezak and Edmondson said talks would get under way this summer, outlining a planning process by which a possible merger could occur. The actual go-ahead to merge is subject to the approval of the Alfred University Board of Trustees, Alfred State College Council and the State University Board of Trustees. In May, SUNY Vice Chancellor Richard Miller, who is the chief operating officer of the 64-campus system, said SUNY is willing to consider what he called "an exciting possibility of a public-private partnership that would benefit the entire region and the state as a whole." "From the beginning, the two college presidents and SUNY have agreed that unless the proposed merger is beneficial to both institutions, it will not move forward. Earlier this week, Sen. Charles Schumer, in Belmont for a town meeting, was faced with questions from members of the audience who alleged that merger talks were going on "in secret," and that the merger would result in elimination of two-year degree programs that are vital to the region's economy; a loss of jobs between the two institutions, which have a combined work force of more than 1,100 employees; and would also lessen area residents' access to an education at a state-supported school." "Senator Schumer has been a good friend to both Alfred University and Alfred State College," said Edmondson, "and it is unfortunate he had to learn about the proposed merger in such a manner, but we do understand that without new information to release, some people will engage in speculation. "In May, we had informed our state representatives - Senators Pat McGee and Randy Kuhl, both of whom have come out publicly in favor of the discussion, and Assemblywoman Cathy Young - because Alfred State is a SUNY unit, as is the College of Ceramics, with its School of Ceramic Engineering and Materials Science and its School of Art and Design, on our own campus," said Edmondson. "Congressman Amo Houghton has also been informed about the merger, but we had not yet briefed Senators Schumer and Clinton because we simply have not made any decisions or commitments. "I am calling both Senators, and we do intend to consult fully with them as our plans emerge," said Edmondson. "I understand that Senator Schumer indicated he would support a statutory college. That is, of course, the most likely model now under consideration. I am confident that he will be an enthusiastic supporter of any plan that benefits Alfred State College, Alfred University and our region." "From the beginning, Rezak and Edmondson have stressed that the merger process, if it is approved, may take at least five years to implement. During the planning process, they have said that no jobs will be lost except by "natural attrition," meaning that if a job falls vacant because of retirement or resignation, it will be evaluated before it is filled. They have also stressed that the two institutions are alike in many important ways: both have as a primary component of their mission serving the educational needs of Western New York, and both have histories of providing education to children of disadvantaged families, many of

whom were the first in those families to gain a college degree. While there has been no decision about how a merged institution might be organized, one possibility is that a second statutory college at Alfred University might be created. A statutory unit is one that is created by an act of the State Legislature and is partially supported by the state, but is located on the campus of a private university that administers it under a contract with the state. There are currently five statutory colleges in New York - four are located at Cornell University and the fifth is the College of Ceramics at Alfred University. In spite of the assurances by both presidents, there are a number of questions that need to be resolved, agreed administrators from both Alfred State and Alfred University. "Basically, employees want to know three things," said James Grillo, vice president for Marketing and Enrollment Management at Alfred State College. "First, they want to know if the merger will affect their jobs. Next, they want to know how we reconcile our differing educational missions. Finally, they want to know what this single new university will look like after the merger. How big? How selective? How expensive?" However, said Grillo, it will be a while before answers to those questions, and many others that have already arisen, can be addressed. "The planning process we are starting next week will give us the answers to these and other concerns," said Grillo. "The answers aren't coming from outside, either. Everyone here will have a hand in resolving the issues." "Since we proposed the merger in late May, there has been a lot of speculation on both sides of Main Street about what might happen," said Michael E. Hyde, vice president for University Relations at Alfred University. "I guess it's just human nature to fret about big changes, but the truth is virtually nothing has been decided about the merger. We want to see if it's possible to combine ourselves into something new, something different from what either of us is today, something greater than the sum of its parts. So, now it's time to roll up our sleeves and get to work answering all those questions."