



Creative Collaboration: Merging Two Arts Programs Into One Department

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Just six months ago, I became the chair of a new department formed by uniting two existing programs—theatre and dance—at Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas. I was an external hire, and not only was I new to this institution but I also was new to serving as a chair, although I brought with me more than a decade of experience in various leadership positions in academia and professional associations. I was attracted to the challenge of uniting these two related disciplines and eager to work in a department that did so, given my own research and creative specialty in musical theatre, which often combines the two art forms. Housing these two related disciplines in one department is far from new, and a Google search of such turns up pages of links to numerous theatre and dance departments across the country. However, I was somewhat unprepared for the extent of the challenges. Below is a brief outline of some of those challenges, as well as a description of how we are beginning to meet them, with the caveat that we are in the early phases of this process. It is my hope that this outline and description can be translated to other departments, in other disciplines, that are undergoing a similar transition.

Differing objectives

The two fields, no matter how similar, may have differing goals regarding pedagogy, research/creative work, and service. In terms of theatre and dance, both training and the creative process of producing performances can be quite different. For example, although it is unadvisable, *anyone* can potentially act, regardless of training, while dancing ballet requires at least a modicum of technique. Further, theatre, particularly in educational environments, is often text based, beginning with a play that is realized in production within a matter of weeks. Dance usually relies entirely on nonverbal language, and its creation can be a semester-long process.

Physical separation

The two disciplines may be housed in separate buildings, sometimes across campus. Theatre and dance here at Lamar are not only separated by objectives but also are physically separate, a (thankfully) short walk from each other. My office is in the theatre building, ensuring that I see the dance students and faculty less than their theatre counterparts and limiting opportunities for exchange between the two disciplines.

Lack of a mission

Disciplines may be united for more pragmatic than philosophical reasons. Until this year, both theatre and dance were parts of a department that included music. However, the music program was disproportionately larger than either theatre or dance, hence overshadowing them. Once the smaller programs grew in majors and faculty, Lamar's administrators insightfully realized the benefits of granting theatre and dance autonomy to encourage further growth of both. Still, there seemed to be no larger philosophical justification for the merger, and no mission statement for the new department had been created.

The development of a strategic plan is the obvious start to meeting these challenges, and I would highly recommend allowing the time and space to do so early in anyone's tenure as chair. I held a retreat immediately upon my arrival, and although I should have made opportunities for ongoing strategic planning during the semester, we have had to wait until the semester's end to continue the process. A mission—and action steps to fulfill it—will help clarify shared goals for faculty and students in both disciplines by exploring what we can do together that we could not do before. The planning and implementation of interdisciplinary classes, projects, performances, and events will help bridge theatre and dance both physically and metaphorically; for example, we are exploring a degree in musical theatre, collaborating on musicals, and involving students from both fields in both theatrical productions and dance concerts. Finally, involving all stakeholders in this process is crucial to empower the faculty and students and to promote a sense of identity as a new department.
