

This said, *The Sum of Us* is an important book that will speak to audiences from a broad array of sectors, movements, and backgrounds. The work is particularly valuable for those who are seeking to further racial equity across public policy areas or who are striving to grow movements for racial justice by drawing in activists from other organizing efforts. McGhee offers us a better, truer story than the one of human hierarchy that has wrought so much harm across our communities, nations, and planet. This book champions human equality and the joy, strength, and prosperity we reap when we join together to honor it.

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#### WHEN COLLEGES CLOSE: LEADING IN A TIME OF CRISIS

by Mary L. Churchill and David J. Chard

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The United States higher education sector is on the edge of a precipice: for the first time in nearly three decades, it is estimated that the number of high school graduates—the bread-and-butter consumers of four-year college degrees—is going to decline nationally (Grawe, 2018). This grim projection has sounded alarm bells at many four-year colleges that heavily recruit traditional college-age students, especially small, regional, and nonselective colleges. For such institutions, shrinking applicant pools can spark a cataclysmic chain of events: fewer high school graduates means fewer potential students to recruit and thus lower enrollment numbers, which translates into less revenue and, ultimately, the institution struggling to stay afloat. A growing number of institutions are already in a precarious financial state (D’Amato, 2020), and enrollment changes in the secondary sector may be what pushes institutions to close or pursue arrangements like mergers to keep their doors open.

How can leaders, particularly at small colleges, help their institutions navigate this challenging landscape? Mary Churchill and David Chard’s timely book, *When Colleges Close: Leading in a Time of Crisis*, is a resource for precisely those senior higher education leaders whose colleges are “facing strong headwinds” (p. 3). Highlighting their own experience leading a small, private liberal arts college in the midst of declining enrollments and revenue shortfalls, Churchill and Chard offer an inside look at how higher education leaders can approach charting the future of their institutions when that future may mean no longer existing at all.

The book tells the story of Wheelock College, a small Boston college with a focus on training teachers and social workers, and how its leadership proactively addressed concerns about its continued viability by merging with Boston University’s (BU) School of Education. As told by Chard, Wheelock’s fourteenth president, and Churchill, the former vice president for academic

affairs at Wheelock, the narrative takes readers through the major events in the two years leading up to the closure of Wheelock College on May 31, 2018. The book opens with a short preface on the history of Wheelock before outlining in chapter 1 the myriad forces threatening the existence of the college. Chapters 2 and 3 then discuss Chard's arrival at Wheelock in 2017 and his work galvanizing trustees and other stakeholders to assess strategic partnerships for ensuring the sustainability of the college's mission and legacy. Chapters 4 and 5 specifically examine the decision to pursue a statutory merger and thus formally dissolve Wheelock College, outlining the innovative processes used to identify its ultimate partner institution, Boston University. After detailing in chapters 6 and 7 how Wheelock and BU managed the specifics of the merger—including the transfer of academic programs, students, faculty, and staff—the book concludes by describing the formal closure of Wheelock and its rebirth as the BU Wheelock College of Education and Human Development.

At once a memoir and a leadership how-to guide, *When Colleges Close* is more than simply a retelling of Churchill and Chard's experiences overseeing the Wheelock merger; it is a resource for fellow higher education leaders and administrators who currently—or in the future—find themselves considering mergers or other strategic partnerships to ensure their institutions' long-term success. Churchill and Chard's guidance manifests in a few ways throughout the book. First, the authors delve into the details of the merger, describing every facet of the process—from how a team of Wheelock trustees and administrators researched partnership options to how Wheelock implemented the complex integration process with BU. The authors provide not only very specific details throughout the text, such as outlining all the committees formed throughout the merger and the stakeholders comprising them, but they also offer useful context for the decisions Wheelock leadership ultimately made. In doing so, they help readers understand whether such courses of action may be appropriate for their own institutional contexts. Churchill and Chard supplement this comprehensive description with artifacts from the Wheelock-BU merger. Notably, chapter 5 includes a copy of the rubric that Wheelock used to assess proposals from potential partner institutions, and chapter 6 incorporates an excerpt from the merger agreement. These robust and tangible resources set the book apart, directly informing the work of readers considering similar partnership arrangements.

Churchill and Chard also impart their wisdom by explicitly sharing the “leadership lessons” learned from steering Wheelock through the merger process, summarizing these lessons at the end of each chapter to increase their accessibility. One such compelling lesson emphasizes the importance of educating faculty about their role in the merger process and how it differs from that of the board of trustees. Churchill and Chard recall in chapter 6 how Wheelock faculty were eager to engage in direct negotiations with BU about issues like job titles, compensation, and the transfer of academic programs. However,

the authors note that “in retrospect, it is obvious that there was a clear lack of understanding of the fiduciary responsibility of the board to negotiate this transition” given that “faculty can inform the board of the importance of key issues and concerns of the faculty . . . but the actual negotiations are between institutional legal counsel and boards” (p. 99). They argue that clear communication with faculty is vital for managing expectations throughout the merger process. Such reflections about ways to better engage in authentic, servant leadership are some of Churchill and Chard’s most valuable contributions.

*When Colleges Close* is a valuable resource precisely because Churchill and Chard do not sugarcoat their experiences overseeing the closure of Wheelock. The book clearly touts the successes of Wheelock’s merger, including that Wheelock was able to find a partner that would sustain its mission and legacy, that tenured faculty were guaranteed permanent roles at BU, and that BU retained nearly 50 percent of Wheelock’s staff. Yet, the book does not shy away from detailing the obstacles that threatened the success of the closure. One such obstacle described in detail was the complex process of integrating Wheelock with BU. Chapters 6 and 7 make clear that the integration phase of the merger was even more difficult than the partnership search and negotiation phases, requiring consultation with all of Wheelock’s constituents—including students, faculty, staff, alumni, donors, accreditation bodies, and state and federal governments. Addressing the concerns of faculty and staff worried about their jobs and the futures of their academic programs, drawing up “teach out” agreements for Wheelock undergraduates whose degree programs were not transferring to BU, and contending with concerns among the BU student body about dilution of the BU brand were just a few of the challenges Churchill and Chard navigated. In presenting a balanced perspective that highlights both the highs and lows of the merger, *When Colleges Close* offers a realistic sense of what it takes to shepherd a small college to a successful end.

While the book was a compelling read, the authors’ tendency to write in the third person misaligns with the highly personal nature of the advice and experiences they share. A third-person voice was appropriate for some sections, such as in chapter 1’s discussion of the forces threatening the continued existence of Wheelock College, but in other places the narrative would have benefited from a first-person perspective. One example is the description in chapter 2 of Chard’s arrival at Wheelock and the drastic decisions he had to make at the beginning of his presidency to keep Wheelock’s doors open—including cutting staff, implementing retirement buyouts, and selling college real estate to generate cash. Because the chapter is written from a third-person perspective, however, Chard’s narration feels distant, and readers do not get a strong sense of him and how he felt implementing these difficult decisions. A first-person perspective would have allowed Chard’s experience to resonate more deeply with individuals who find themselves in a similar situation, as well as allow readers unfamiliar with this higher education context to empathize with him and the critical decisions he faced. Overall, providing a more robust por-

trait of Chard and Churchill as people and as higher education leaders would have strengthened the narrative.

In summary, *When Colleges Close* offers fascinating insight into the creation of BU Wheelock and, more broadly, demonstrates that mergers can be a viable option for small colleges struggling to stay afloat. Churchill and Chard's reflections on leading Wheelock through the merger are especially valuable, as so few colleges have successfully merged or engaged in strategic partnerships in recent years. Given the realities of the higher education sector today, many leaders at small colleges might soon find themselves confronting the prospect of a closure or merger. It would behoove them to keep this book handy.

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## References

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