

washingtonpost.com

Howard's President To Retire Next Year

Faculty Had Called For His Removal

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Washington Post Staff Writers
Saturday, April 28, 2007; B01

H. Patrick Swygert announced yesterday that he would retire from the presidency of [Howard University](#) at the end of June 2008, a decision that came weeks after faculty leaders called for his ouster, saying the university was in crisis.

Swygert, 64, has led Howard, one of the nation's most prestigious historically black universities, since 1995. He arrived at a time of low morale after a string of leadership changes -- he was the fourth president in six years -- layoffs and sagging enrollment.

The president said yesterday evening that he has put the school in a sound direction and felt it was time to think about the next phase of his life. He wanted to announce his decision now, he said, to give a proper farewell to the senior class, which graduates May 12.

"We just finished a great capital campaign, this is a terrific class and [Oprah](#) [Winfrey] is going to be our commencement speaker," he said. "What better time? I would hate to have any of my soon-to-be graduates say to me, 'Why didn't you tell us?'"

But there has been a growing tension between Swygert and some members of the board of trustees, in part because of his rigid management style, according to sources who asked not to be identified because of the sensitivity of the situation.

And long-standing tensions with faculty flared in March, when the faculty senate council voted to send a letter to the board that described "an intolerable condition of incompetence and dysfunction at the highest level."

Addison Barry Rand, chairman of the board, said a committee is being formed to plan the search for Howard's 16th president. He said that Swygert has a "proud legacy of achievements" at Howard and that he displayed dedication, leadership and "obvious love for the institution."

The faculty letter in March cited a [National Science Foundation](#) audit critical of the way Howard managed its grant money -- the federal government provides the bulk of the funding for the private university. The letter accused Swygert of jeopardizing Howard's finances, letting academic programs falter with inadequate facilities and failing to implement programs after funds had been awarded. And it said Swygert had failed to find alternative funding to bolster federal appropriations, which have leveled off in recent years.

At the time, Swygert said that he would not resign.

He met with faculty in late March. In April, the council voted to reaffirm its original statement, 19 to 0.

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The council has about 32 members elected by the 1,100 full-time faculty members; 19 were in attendance at that meeting.

Theodore Bremner, chairman of the faculty senate, said yesterday that no one had expected Swygert's announcement. But, "it's what we wanted, it's what we asked for," he said. "Now we as a faculty need to be sure we get the right kind of leadership to move the university forward."

Professor [Richard Wright](#) said he was astonished when he heard yesterday evening that Swygert would retire. "Wow!" he said several times. "This is totally unexpected. This is a sudden reversal of what he said when he met with the council."

Wright said the faculty leadership's concern has been growing for years. "Anytime the administration creates too much distance from faculty, that is not a good thing for the institution," he said.

There have been other signs of problems at Howard in the past few years, including student protests over the lack of leadership at the divinity school and concern over the nursing program. Accrediting agencies had raised questions about several programs -- the pharmacy program was taken off probation this year -- and a plan for the city and Howard to build a \$400 million medical center, which Swygert had pushed, collapsed suddenly amid questions about the university's oversight of the existing hospital.

Swygert acknowledged that the hospital continues to lose money. But he said he is proud of his tenure and expects to do a lot more in the year he has left.

He listed a number of accomplishments, noting that Howard's enrollment and bond rating are both up, and that he just announced the successful completion of a \$250 million capital campaign, months ahead of schedule. He praised the university's Fulbright and Rhodes scholars, its ability to recruit leading faculty and the redevelopment of the LeDroit Park neighborhood, an effort led by the university and the [Fannie Mae Foundation](#). The school has been updated with research libraries and wireless technology.

Student leaders praised him: "I've seen the tremendous changes he has brought to the campus," said Richard Leachy, president of the Graduate Student Council, who came to Howard in 1997 as an undergraduate and is leaving next month with a law degree. "I don't think people realize how much he has done. When I came, it was like a baseball field with dirt, and now the campus is beautiful. There are more programs, and the capital campaign was great. I'm sad he's leaving. He was an inspiration to me."

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