



Missouri Department of Higher Education

Higher Education Headlines

February 8, 2016

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Online college students could receive needs-based scholarship under proposal, Feb. 8

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Finding the right system leader will be crucial in fixing a broken Mizzou

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University of Missouri firestorm over racial issues that drove two leaders from their jobs still smolders

Never has there been a more important hire than the replacement for former system president Tim Wolfe

The University of Missouri brand is damaged, and the firestorm over racial issues that drove two top leaders from their jobs last fall still smolders.

Last week at a meeting interrupted by student protest, the board of curators began the process that they hope will help restore the university to its high perch.

That's the search to replace former system president Tim Wolfe, whose perceived racial insensitivity fanned unrest on the Columbia campus that included a student's hunger strike and a threatened boycott by the football team.

Never, as some see it, has there been a more important hire in the 177-year history of one of the nation's top land grant and research universities.

It will be the new president's job to oversee the rebuilding of fractured relationships with students, faculty and alumni. And with state legislators bent on cutting taxpayer support.

The system's new leader will also be the one to pick a new chancellor for the flagship campus in Columbia, which now has eight positions on the chancellor's staff and four dean's seats filled with interim appointments. The campus has also seen a dip in new enrollment applications and donor dollars.

"It's just very, very sad that we've been in the news as much as we have with bad things when there's so much good going on there," said former curator Judith Haggard.

And yet as events last week made all too clear, bad things continue to mount, making the new president's challenges all the more difficult.

The American Association of University Professors has questioned the university's recent suspension and investigation of assistant professor Melissa Click, who was caught on video blocking a photojournalist covering a student protest.

The Missouri auditor's office announced Thursday it would examine the system's administration.

And the university's credit rating outlook slipped last week from stable to negative because of concerns about finances and potential lost enrollment.

What also has ignited recent questioning about the stability of the university was the scathing, self-serving email Wolfe sent to supporters last month slamming the board of curators, former Columbia chancellor R. Bowen Loftin and state legislators.

"I believe the University of Missouri is under attack and current leadership from the board on down is frozen," he wrote.

Many saw the [letter](#) as final proof Wolfe was a poor choice by the curators when he was hired in late 2011.

Wolfe did not respond to numerous requests for comment, but current and former curators spoke openly to The Star about his presidency.

Some continue to defend him; others say the perception that he was run off by students may make it hard to find his successor.

“I don’t think there’s going to be a whole lot of top-notch candidates breaking down the door,” said Wayne Goode, a former curator and former state senator. “I hope I’m wrong.”

Hiring Wolfe

Curators will get help finding Wolfe’s replacement from a national search firm, as they did when he was hired. However, they are promising to be more inclusive and transparent. The search committee will include curators, two students, two faculty members and a member of the staff. Public forums are planned for each campus in April.

The search committee that chose Wolfe was made up solely of curators. An advisory committee included faculty and students, but members had little say.

“The advisory committee was a sham. ... It never received any information on candidates,” said Gary Ebersole, a history professor at the University of Missouri-Kansas City.

Curators on the Wolfe search team said they talked to faculty and students, cast a wide net and narrowed the field to two finalists. But the only candidate the advisory committee ever saw was Wolfe, a business executive with deep ties to Columbia. He was a hometown high school football star and MU business school alumnus, but he had no experience in academia.

“I consider that a failed search,” said current curator David Steelman. “If we do not have a broad pool of candidates to choose from, I have no problem saying let’s restart the search.”

This time around, Steelman would prefer someone with a strong academic background, someone who understands “that leading faculty is not command and control, like in a business.”

Wolfe was the second system leader in a row tapped from the corporate sector. He replaced Gary Forsee, a former CEO at Sprint.

When Forsee was selected, faculty members were skeptical about a corporate guy at the helm. But his success won them over, so curators were comfortable picking another businessman.

Haggard said Wolfe seemed to have many of Forsee's attributes, and the fact that he had community ties and his parents were both college professors were added pluses.

"He was a Columbia person," she said. "We thought the world of him when we hired him."

Curator John Phillips said the board now knows corporate success does not guarantee a successful university leader.

"Gary Forsee was a quick study on the challenges in running a large university — dealing with a board of political appointees, having to conduct most of your business in public and shared governance," Phillips said. "Wolfe ... was not as successful."

The mistakes

When Wolfe was hired four years ago, curators cited his listening skills.

"The best listener I ever met," Warren Erdman, then chairman of the board of curators, told Inside Columbia magazine in 2012. "He generally wants to learn from every conversation."

In that article, Wolfe summed up his secret for success: "Listen to your clients or the market, listen to your people, listen to experts."

Many now question whether Wolfe practiced what he preached.

"I don't want to dance on Tim Wolfe's grave," Steelman said. "I do think President Wolfe had strengths, but he had difficulty with collaboration. You can't collaborate if you can't listen."

Still, Wolfe got important stuff done:

- He saved money by sharing things like legal services among the four campuses.

- He reviewed how each campus responds to reports of sexual assault and made improvements.
- Systemwide enrollment exceeded projections, surpassing 77,000 by fall 2014.
- The percentage of underserved minorities was higher than ever.
- The university saw its largest state funding in 30 years and the first capital program for buildings in more than a decade.

But Wolfe started off badly. In May 2012, he ordered the closure of the five-decades-old university publishing house to save \$400,000. But he later reversed himself after a groundswell of angry faculty and alumni stressed the press's importance in publishing professors' scholarly works.

"Had he talked to faculty first, he would have learned that no university press breaks even, let alone turns a profit," Ebersole said.

But what Wolfe concedes may have been a bigger mistake was his hiring of Loftin to lead the Columbia campus.

Like Wolfe, Loftin was hired with the thought that he would eliminate inefficiencies and shake things up.

But some say Loftin, like his boss, may have moved too fast in an academic culture where change comes painstakingly slow.

"I think that quickness caused Bowen and Tim to make decisions not well thought through," Phillips said.

Loftin stripped graduate teaching assistants of health care insurance with only a 24-hour notice, then reversed the decision when those students protested.

He eliminated the vice chancellor for health science position, which angered faculty, who told university leaders they wanted Loftin gone.

University deans claimed Loftin created a "toxic environment through threat, fear and intimidation" and voted no confidence in him.

In his finger-pointing email, Wolfe blamed Loftin for bowing to legislative pressures to cut ties with Planned Parenthood and for failing to communicate with system leaders as

football players planned to boycott, and he accused Loftin of shifting the focus of student protest onto Wolfe to save his own job.

Loftin, in an interview with The Star on Friday, called that last charge “absolutely ludicrous.” He said the protesters are intelligent students who made mistakes and “to think I would manipulate them like pawns on a chessboard is disrespectful” to the students.

Students said they shifted blame to Wolfe for the campus chaos, which had been brewing since the August 2014 fatal police shooting in Ferguson, Mo., because Wolfe had more power than Loftin. And Loftin had been meeting with students for months.

The pivot point was an incident at last fall’s homecoming parade.

Protesters target Wolfe

When demonstrators blocked the red Chevrolet convertible he was riding in down University Avenue, Wolfe didn’t step out of the car and talk with them about racial problems on campus. Instead, [he sat for 10 minutes](#) in the passenger seat, listening to their chants until police broke up the protest.

In a TV interview, [Wolfe explained](#) that wasn’t the time for him to make a public statement. Wolfe said his plan was to meet with students and his message would be “Teach me. Tell me what’s on your minds. ... I’m here to listen.”

But students with Concerned Student 1950, the predominantly black student protesters, said Wolfe was dismissive when they met and didn’t take their complaints seriously.

Former curator David Bradley describes the meeting differently. He said Wolfe told him the students did not come to find resolution. They refused to shake Wolfe’s hand, peppered him with yes or no questions and then left.

Some of the same students later cornered Wolfe during a visit to Kansas City and when asked if he understood systemic oppression, Wolfe gave what they believed was [a flip answer](#) and walked away.

That stands in contrast to how Wolfe dealt with another potential crisis. When news surfaced that the university had failed to investigate rape allegations against football players by a former member of the swim team, Wolfe launched a systemwide review of how sexual assault cases were handled.

None of the curators knew Wolfe's resignation was coming. Phillips said he learned about it 30 minutes before the announcement.

"I tried to talk him out of it," Phillips said. "He didn't listen."

The Columbia controversies couldn't have come at a worse time for the university's fundraising efforts.

About a month before the November protests, the public phase of a \$1.3 billion fundraising campaign for the Columbia campus was unveiled.

But the campaign has stumbled as bad publicity mounted. More than 1,500 emails poured in from alumni threatening to pull or withhold donations, some upset that Wolfe bowed to pressure, some angry that he and others didn't handle things better.

"There are a lot of very confused, upset, angry, embarrassed alumni that we got emails on that ran the gamut," said Tom Hiles, vice chancellor for advancement.

Most of the university's major donors stuck with Mizzou.

Still, it will be a challenge reaching this year's record fundraising goal of \$165 million, Hiles said.

Choosing the next president

Some say Wolfe's personal involvement in the Columbia campus problems was unwise.

"The role of the president is not to manage what's going on on each of the campuses; the chancellors are doing that," said Brady Deaton, who preceded Loftin and was MU chancellor for nearly 10 years. The president's job, he said, is to coordinate and work with chancellors on budget and academic programs.

Deaton boasts that MU is one of 34 public research institutions in the country that are members of the esteemed Association of American Universities. Some argue even after all the turmoil that Wolfe and Loftin did a lot to maintain that standing.

"This is a great university," Deaton said. "It has great faculty doing great things."

And that faculty has mixed feelings about the Wolfe administration.

"The best I can describe decision-making under Loftin/Wolfe is that it was often mysterious," said Art Jago, a member of the MU Faculty Council. "Did faculty like

Wolfe? Some thought he had a strong grasp of strategy, others thought he was out of touch.”

As much as the university needs stability, there’s no need to rush in choosing a new president, Steelman said. Interim president Mike Middleton, a former civil rights lawyer and longtime MU administrator, “is doing a very good job,” he said.

More important is choosing the right person. The job could be hampered by the fact that three of the nine seats on the board of curators are vacant, and Republican lawmakers have threatened to block Gov. Jay Nixon’s attempts to fill those posts until next year, when a new governor takes office. Others complain the board — all white lawyers — lacks diversity.

Nixon promises, however, to make interim appointees when the legislature ends its session this spring.

The board can then come to some consensus on what it wants in a new president.

Some faculty and students already have their preferences.

“The next university president needs to be someone who has enough self-confidence and sense of self that she/he can be humble in interacting with students, faculty, alumni, donors and other constituents,” Ebersole said. “Obviously, the president also has to have good political antennas — sensing issues of race, privilege, discrimination, economic inequality and so on on the campuses and in the workplace.”

A university does so many things — running everything from medical schools and hospitals to conservatories, journalism schools and physics labs — no one person can be an expert at all of them, said Ben Trachtenberg, chairman of the MU Faculty Council.

“The university system president must be humble enough to accept that he can’t know everything and know that counsel with a wide group of stakeholders is essential to success,” he said.

Ken Bryant Jr., president of the Graduate Student Association at MU, said the system needs “someone with a holistic background in diversity and inclusion, someone who understands more than just race, gender issues, ableness.”

Bryant, a fourth-year grad student in political science, said what students want in a president and a chancellor “is legitimacy.”

He added: "Students want someone with a background ... who can articulate a vision of diversity and inclusion. Next time, when the president is tasked with responding about diversity and inclusion, and it may not be about race, he should be prepared."

TIM WOLFE ERA

December 2011: Wolfe is hired.

May 2012: Attempted closure of University of Missouri Press.

October 2012: Press decision is reversed.

Dec. 6, 2013: R. Bowen Loftin's hire is announced.

Jan. 24, 2014: MU swimmer Sasha Menu Courey's sexual assault claims are made public.

October 2014: Wolfe announces timeline to improve university system's response to sexual assault claims.

June 2015: University announces record enrollment for the 2014-2015 fiscal year and construction of four new buildings systemwide.

August 2015: University announces it will no longer subsidize graduate students' health insurance.

Oct. 9, 2015: MU deans meet with Wolfe to ask for Loftin's resignation.

Nov. 2, 2015: Jonathan Butler begins hunger strike.

Nov. 3, 2015: MU English department faculty votes no confidence in Loftin.

Nov. 8, 2015: Mizzou football players refuse to play until Wolfe is removed from the presidency.

Nov. 9, 2015: Wolfe and Loftin resign