

Leadership changes at Cedarville University point to conservative direction

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(RNS) A private religious university in Ohio is undergoing a faculty shakeup, including an exodus of women faculty, after having been taken over by Southern Baptists.

Cedarville University, whose well-known alumni include ABC News correspondent Paula Faris, executive director of the NFL Players' Association DeMaurice Fitzgerald Smith and California pastor and author David Jeremiah, had already been perceived as a more conservative campus in the realm of Christian colleges.

The school, 30 minutes east of Dayton, Ohio, promotes a creationist approach to science and requires daily chapel attendance and an academic minor in the Bible. In 2008, the school rescinded a speaking invitation to popular Christian author Shane Claiborne, causing controversy among alumni.

Then in June, the school hired Thomas White, formerly vice president for student services and communications at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Texas, as its new president. Former president Bill Brown and vice president of student life Carl Ruby left earlier, sparking debate over the university's future.

The campus of 3,400 students has also seen the departure of many faculty and staff, including half the teachers in its Bible department.

That 25-member board now includes only one woman. Added to the board is Southwestern President Paige Patterson, a staunch biblical literalist and one of the

leaders of the conservative resurgence in the Southern Baptist Convention.

The new president downplayed the changes. Addressing the departing faculty, White said that anytime you have a new leader, like a football coach, you get a new team.

“At Cedarville, there’s no major change happening, no major shift at the institution. We’ve been conservative since [our founding],” he said.

The recent departures include prominent women such as Bible professor Joy Fagan, associate vice president of student life Kirsten Gibbs and Briana DuPree, resident director and coordinator of diversity student programs.

Fagan, who signed a confidentiality statement, said she’s limited in what she can say.

“I do not feel I am a good fit for the university going forward,” she said, declining to elaborate. Fagan is the only woman listed on Cedarville’s Bible department website.

DuPree, who is a pastor at a local church, declined to comment, as did Gibbs.

The changes have been felt all over campus, but especially among women said Ariana Cheng, a junior at the university.

“Women can teach but only within certain boundaries,” said Cheng, who is studying international studies. “Women feel like they can’t necessarily take a position of leadership without going against some rule.

White said nothing has changed in the school’s official policy and Cedarville has women in every department, .

“Our position is that we don’t train women to be in the office of pastor, elder or bishop,” White said.

A philosophy faculty member caused a stir last fall when writing an op-ed for the campus newspaper on “Why I am Not Voting for Romney.” The philosophy department staff has since been cut back. The philosophy and physics majors have been eliminated.

Founded in 1887 by the Reformed Presbyterian Church in North America, Cedarville became affiliated with General Association of Regular Baptist Churches. The latter group kicked Cedarville out because of its association with Southern Baptists.

In turn, Cedarville's board hired Southern Baptists to enforce its conservative identity.

Observers say that the two presidents put the university on two very different trajectories. Under Brown, some say, it fit under a wide evangelical umbrella that engages the broader culture in ways similar to institutions such as Wheaton College (Illinois) or Taylor University (Indiana). Now, one alumnus said, Cedarville might be viewed as more akin to Moody Bible Institute in Chicago — a school that does not allow women to teach men theology.

Staff from Southwestern and Southern seminaries have replaced many of the Cedarville staff that left. White said nothing has changed in college policy on women teaching men.

The difference between the two administrations, said David Dockery, president of Union University in Tennessee, lies in the presidents' theological perspectives. Brown would have put a greater emphasis on general revelation, finding truth outside of the Scriptures in God's creation, in the natural world, Dockery said.

"Dr. White's emphasis on the truthfulness and the sufficiency of the Bible causes people to ask a different kind of question," he said. "It's not so much the integration of faith and learning; It's the integration of Scripture and discipline."

White said no doctrinal statements have changed since his appointment. The college has had a position on the sufficiency of Scripture as a requirement for tenure since 2004.

Cedarville is considering two changes in its doctrinal statement, one that would explicitly state that life begins at conception and another that marriage is between a man and a woman, White said.

The college's hiring policy says it "reserves the right to discriminate on the basis of religion, marital status or gender (with regard to certain positions)."

In September the university said it is under review by the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights in response to a complaint claiming the university is in violation of Title IX — a federal gender equity law that requires colleges to adjudicate sexual harassment and violence on campus.

The office is still investigating whether campus officials resolved a complaint alleging sex discrimination.