

Baylor's Sloan steps down to chancellor: Conflict over long-range strategy

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Baylor University President Robert Sloan will step down June 1, ending one of the stormiest periods in the school's 160-year history. Admitting he was a "lightning rod" while pushing for ambitious growth at the Waco, Texas, campus, Sloan said he willingly accepted the post of chancellor.

Baylor's board of regents, which supported Sloan's transition from the top executive post in a conference call January 20, ratified the decision at its February 3-4 meeting and outlined the search for a new president.

Sloan's future at Baylor had been a topic of debate—and at least three votes among the regents—during recent years. But Sloan and the regents reached their decision "by mutual agreement," said Will Davis, board chairman, at a news conference on January 21.

Controversy over Sloan's leadership flared a couple of years ago, not long after the regents approved Baylor 2012, the university's long-range strategy to become one of the top U.S. schools of its kind.

Supporters praised Baylor 2012, as well as Sloan's vision for it. They lauded its core value of blending strong Christian faith and the highest academic standards. They also affirmed such goals as strengthening faculty research, raising academic standards of students, expanding campus facilities to "world-class" quality and making the sports teams strongly competitive in the Big XII Athletic Conference.

Opponents, however, criticized Sloan's implementation of 2012, and some condemned components of the plan, including the cost. They said Sloan was pulling Baylor from its traditional Texas Baptist moorings. They claimed that beloved, long-tenured professors were being shuffled aside for younger research-oriented faculty, that typical Texas Baptist families no longer could afford to send their children to Baylor, and that the rapid expansion of campus facilities created unbearable debt.

The divisions split the fiercely loyal "Baylor family." Many alumni divided into two groups, buying ads and waging pro- and anti-Sloan campaigns.

The faculty also divided, with 418 out of 838 teachers calling for Sloan's dismissal in a recent referendum. Those negative votes constituted 85 percent of the ballots actually cast in the referendum, but Sloan's supporters noted that many faculty loyal to the president boycotted the referendum.

The votes that counted, however, took place in closed sessions of the 36-member board of regents. Last September the board voted—by what one regent characterized as a "very close" margin—to postpone indefinitely a call for Sloan's resignation.

Sloan told reporters attending the news conference that he first approached Davis about a transition last November.

Davis commented: "Dr. Sloan said to me, 'I believe it's time to resign.' I asked, 'Would you take chancellor?' He said, 'I'll have to think about it.'"

Following that exchange, each of the regents was polled, and they agreed to move Sloan from president to chancellor.

“The natural side effect of change is conflict,” Sloan said at the news conference. “We moved quickly and boldly to implement the vision and found that Baylor is not immune to the discomfort and insecurity generated by change. My leadership has often been a lightning rod for that discomfort.”

As chancellor, Sloan will focus on “fund raising, recruitment and promoting Baylor 2012 every way I can,” he said. Sloan, who made \$410,000 a year as president, will serve “at the pleasure of the board” and have an office on campus, Davis said.

Sloan, 55, is a graduate of Baylor, Princeton Theological Seminary and the University of Basel in Switzerland. He taught at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary from 1980 to 1983, then joined the religion faculty at Baylor and served as the first dean of the university’s Truett Theological Seminary. He became Baylor president in 1995.

Clifton Robinson, cochairman of the Friends of Baylor, a pro-Sloan group, thanked Sloan “for his incredible contributions to Baylor University over the past ten years.” Robinson said Sloan’s accomplishments included improved academic standing, upgraded campus infrastructure, increased enrollment, expanded faculty and doubled endowment.

Bill Carden, president of the Committee to Restore Integrity to Baylor, a group critical of Sloan’s leadership, expressed hope that the “wide breach” within the Baylor community could be healed. “I admire Dr. Sloan for admitting that Baylor University is far bigger than any one individual.”

“Texas Baptists can come together around this positive decision,” said Charles Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. —*Associated Baptist Press*