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Ben Panko

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The Search Continues: Finding Richmond's Next President

BY BEN PANKO

The future of the University of Richmond is being determined in hushed secrecy this year as a group of 18 trustees, alumni, faculty, staff and students search for a new president.

Nearly seven years after assuming the office, Edward Ayers announced last February that he would resign as president of this 175-year-old institution in June 2015. "As I reflect on all that we have accomplished together since Abby and I arrived at Richmond, I have decided that these culminations provide a natural conclusion to my term as President," Ayers wrote in an email to students, faculty, and staff.

Three months later, the Presidential Search Committee was formed by the Board of Trustees to "ably represent the interests of Trustees, faculty, staff, students, and alumni and [...] recruit an outstanding new leader for the University," in the words of trustees Charles Ledsinger, Jr. and Patricia Rowland. The committee comprises six professors, seven trustees, two staff members, one alumna and two students, senior Alex Holva and sophomore Mia Hagerty.

After its first meeting, the committee selected Witt/Kieffer, a Chicago-based executive recruiting firm, to solicit nominations and recruit potential candidates from around the country. The committee has convened multiple times in person, co-chairwoman Allison Weinstein said, to review candidate profiles and eventually interview them.

"I think my family's hopes for the new president are exactly those of the university community as a whole: another outstanding leader who will build imaginatively on the foundation of excellence here," said Weinstein, the daughter of two Richmond graduates and notable donors. She pointed to the position profile crafted from input from the university community as strongly consistent with the views of the Board of Trustees. In particular, Weinstein noted that there a lot of concerns being discussed about higher education nowadays, including affordability and campus safety. "So we know the new president is going to have to lead the institution in navigating these kinds of issues, and other challenges that higher education may face in the coming years," she said.

THE PROFILE OF A RICHMOND PRESIDENT

There have been nine presidents of the University of Richmond in the 175 years since its founding as Richmond College. Though each was undoubtedly a different person serving in a different time, a profile of the Richmond president has emerged, one which the Presidential Search Committee may embrace or disregard.

Every Richmond president has been a white, American male from the East Coast. Six of them were born and raised in the South, including Ayers. Only Richmond's first two presidents, Robert Ryland and Tiberius Jones, were born in the Commonwealth of Virginia, however.

Richmond's presidents have varied widely in age - Frederic Boatwright was just 27 when appointed, while Samuel Banks was 58. In recent years, however, Richmond has tended to appoint presidents in their late 40s or early 50s, including Ayers, who was 54 when he assumed office.

Since the retirement of George Modlin in 1971, Richmond's presidents have all come from positions at other universities, and all except Ayers have come from private universities. All but one of those presidents came from universities in states bordering Virginia, or within Virginia in Ayers' case.

ED AYERS' FUTURE

Speculation has murmured for most of Ayers' tenure at Richmond that he is a favorite to become president of the University of Virginia, where he was Dean of the College and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences and had taught for nearly 30 years.

"In many people's minds, it would seem pretty natural. ... for Ayers to be a good fit as the U.Va. president," Richmond political consultant Bob Holsworth was quoted by *Style Weekly* in 2009 after the retirement of Virginia president John Casteen. Current U.Va. President Teresa Sullivan has not said what she plans to do after her contract expires in July 2016.

For his part, Ayers said that he intended to remain as a faculty member at Richmond after his resignation. 