

[< Back](#) | [Home](#)



(April on outside, September on inside) "You have had some time now to review the back-ground information on a possible Rice-Baylor merger.... Given what you now know or understand, what is your view on the overall advisability of Rice's merging with Baylor?"

Concerns voiced over BCM merger

By: Seth Brown

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A recent survey of Rice faculty, conducted by Computer Science Professor Moshe Vardi, suggests that Rice's Board of Trustees may have more than finances to deal with when considering a possible merger with the Baylor College of Medicine.

The survey, conducted Sept. 11, indicates that more than 56 percent of the 295 respondents viewed the possible merger as either a somewhat or very bad idea, a significant increase from the 38 percent of the 314 respondents who agreed in a similar survey Vardi conducted in April.

"The faculty want a balance between cost and benefits," Vardi said. "They have become less convinced that this is the right trade-off."

The merger, which has been in the works for almost a year, has been threatened both by Baylor's finances - the college suffered a \$439-million loss in assets from June 2008 to June 2009, according to a quarterly financial report issued by Baylor - and its lack of an adult clinical hospital following the end of its relationship with The Methodist Hospital in 2004 and St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital in 2006, as well as the stagnation of its own hospital project due to financial difficulties.

"Baylor is in bad financial condition and could be a resource drain," Mathematics Professor John Hempel, a member of the Faculty Senate, said. "But a good medical school also brings in a lot of money."

Baylor is ranked 17th among medical schools in both research and primary care, according to U.S. News & World Report.

Vardi's surveys were conducted using an account on surveymonkey.com, which he said cost him \$20.

"It's the best survey, because it's the only survey," Vardi said, regarding criticisms he has received concerning

his methodology.

He added that he would welcome a professional survey, but that it could cost up to \$40,000.

Some of the major concerns professors expressed included reduced resources for their own research, especially for those working outside of fields connected to medicine and the biosciences, as well as possible changes in university culture. Additionally, some were concerned about the inevitable uncertainties inherent in an endeavor as complex as this.

A recent e-mail to the Rice community, signed by both President David Leebron and Baylor Interim President and CEO William Butler, stated that the duration of the memorandum of understanding between the two institutions, which was originally signed at the end of March, has been extended to Jan. 31 by each of their respective boards.

"Before the MOU expires, we hope for significant progress," Vice Provost for Research Jim Coleman said.

Coleman is one of the leaders of a committee assigned to investigate possible academic benefits of the merger and the processes necessary in order for these to take form.

Vardi was not convinced by their report, however, and said alternative options had yet to be properly explored.

"I will have to see arguments for collaborations that cannot be realized without a merger," he said.

He used the Broad Institute - a genomics research facility affiliated with Harvard, MIT and the Whitehead Institute - as an example of the collaboration possible between multiple institutions.

"Rice has not undertaken efforts aimed at developing collaborations that are comparable to the efforts it has taken to push through the merger," Vardi said. "Dreaming collaborations is easy, but realizing collaborations is hard work."

Vardi also said not enough research had been conducted to establish why a merger was necessary to pursue many collaborative projects.

"Many potential new collaborations have been described, but with little analysis of why they have not occurred so far," Vardi said in an online report about the merger.

In April, a Rice Faculty Merger Review Committee was created to identify the costs and benefits of a possible merger and then report their findings to the faculty. This report, made at the end of August, remains confidential, but Vardi, who is one of the committee members, published his own report because he was absent at the time of the committee's presentation.

When asked about the necessity of a merger, Coleman said while smaller projects are certainly possible in the present state, any large-scale initiative would require the coordination of a single administrative entity.

"There can be no single decision for two entities," Coleman said. "If we wanted a major strategic initiative now, we would have to hope that our strategic plans aligned."

Another worry expressed by professors was that their own research funds would be diminished by the merger.

"It would be a very costly merger, with the hope that in the long run, it would be more profitable," one professor, who asked to remain anonymous, said. "The Bedouin sleeps inside the tent, and the camel sleeps outside. Then, one night, the camel sticks its nose in the tent, and the next night, a bit more than its nose, until one night the camel is in the tent and the Bedouin is outside."

Another professor, who also asked to remain anonymous, was concerned about possible cultural changes that could be caused by the merger.

"Will our classes become 90 percent science students, or will the addition be more or less invisible?" the professor said. "There have been no confident assertions. The administration is doing what it can, but no one knows exactly how it will all play out."

Although the Board of Trustees will make any ultimate decisions concerning the merger, Vardi encouraged it to listen to faculty concerns.

"The success of the merger, if it is carried out, will ultimately be decided by the work done by the faculty," Vardi said.

Still, many faculty trust that the administration and board are acting in the best interests of the school.

"There are very smart people working on these problems," Bioengineering Professor Jane Grande-Allen said. "I've chosen to believe Leebron when he says that there are many cultural issues which can be figured out later."

Mathematics Professor Steve Cox said he does not see any opportunities on that scale for other schools within Rice.

"Is this an opportunity we can't afford to miss?" Cox said. "I'm under that impression. The connection between mind and body has no home in any one department."

Business Professor Randy Batsell said he also felt that the merger would ultimately be in Rice's long-term interests.

"I do believe as a result of this merger ... there will be increased collaboration between faculty at Rice and faculty at Baylor," he said.

Still, as evidenced by the results of Vardi's survey, skeptics remain, a fact that surprised one anonymous professor.

"I was surprised that the survey inclined to the negative as much as it did," the professor said. "Even if it's ultimately a political problem, it's one that the board needs to take care of."

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