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Traber's chaotic tenure at Baylor coming to an end

Medical school's leader will instead hold president emeritus post

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JESSICA KOURKOUNIS CHRONICLE FILE
Peter Traber, a gastroenterologist, will focus on personalized genomic medicine.

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Baylor College of Medicine trustees dismissed Peter Traber as president Wednesday after a tumultuous 5½-year tenure that began with the school splitting with longtime partner Methodist Hospital and ended with it struggling to build its own hospital.

Trustees announced after a three-hour meeting that they and Traber agreed he'll step down as president and CEO on Dec. 1. They gave no reason.

"I wouldn't put all the blame on Dr. Traber," Bob Allen, chairman of the trustees, said after the meeting. "The challenges out there are a result of lots of decisions over the past 10 years. I'd blame the board, of which I was one, as much as Dr. Traber."

Highly placed sources previously told the Chronicle that the change was necessary because of seemingly endless turmoil and shaky finances at the private medical college. The school has had significant turnover since the Methodist split and is currently in serious talks with Rice University about a possible merger.

Traber, 53, was not available for comment after the meeting. Under the terms of the deal, he will continue as president emeritus, professor of medicine and consultant to the board.

Baylor will pay Traber roughly \$4.5 million to buy out the remainder of his contract, which runs through 2013. Because he is staying on, there is no severance package.

The board named Dr. William Butler, 76, interim president effective Dec. 1 and said it will launch a national search for a permanent replacement at that time. Butler was Baylor's president from 1979 to 1996.

Year of difficulties

Traber's ouster will cap a particularly difficult year at Baylor, one of the city's most esteemed institutions. Over the summer, it lost

former presidents Dr. Michael DeBakey, who died of natural causes at 99, and Dr. Ralph Feigin, who died of lung cancer at 70.

The first outsider to head Baylor, Traber came to the college in March 2003 as an agent of change expected to increase the institution's clinical revenue, well behind other top medical schools. Its relationship with Methodist was already rocky when he came.

Traber and top trustees were unable to negotiate a long-term deal with Methodist and, instead, the college partnered with St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital. Some observers said the decision to split with Methodist began a downfall at the college, with revenue dwindling and many doctors leaving.

Although Traber was seen as one of the split's great symbols, it was the board that approved the decision.

Still, some observers said, Traber never truly comprehended the depths of the ties between Baylor and Methodist. One former administrator said that Traber never learned to navigate the tricky "geopolitics" of the Texas Medical Center. A 2005 Texas Monthly article depicted him as not knowing how to play the game, not paying "social calls, bourbon in hand for the big guy ... how you get along in Houston."

It didn't help that the relationship with St. Luke's foundered after just two years. Traber subsequently announced that Baylor would build its own hospital, a plan viewed skeptically by many in the medical center. Others said the project would make Traber a hero if he could pull it off.

The hospital is still on course to open in 2011. But amid the credit crunch, trustees recently had to refinance the debt because the project was overbudget and overleveraged. Its future role is unclear, particularly if Rice and Baylor merge.

Baylor is the only top 20 U.S. medical school without a primary private adult teaching hospital.

Sources say the school's current budget projects an \$80 million deficit and that the institution lost \$60 million last year.

No miracle workers

In a letter sent to Baylor faculty after Wednesday's board meeting, Butler wrote of the difficult challenges and called on the college to capture its collective wisdom, use resources strategically, invest in programs assuring future preeminence and be more efficient.

"Nobody can accomplish these things by themselves," Butler wrote. "Neither I, nor anyone else at Baylor, is a miracle worker. Problems are solvable if we all participate. It is imperative that we become fiscally responsible"

Following Butler's recommendation, the board Wednesday named Dr. Susan Hamilton senior vice president and dean of research and Dr. Steven Spann senior vice president and dean of clinical affairs.

During Traber's tenure, National Institutes of Health-designated centers in cancer, asthma and diabetes were established at Baylor, the college's U.S. News and World Report ranking rose from 13th to 10th, and its Best Minds Best Medicine fund-raising campaign reached \$700 million of its \$1 billion goal.

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I raber was considered one of academic medicine's rising stars when he came to Baylor.

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