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Rice-BCM merger falls apart

By [Josh Rutenberg](#) | Jan. 14, 2010, 6 p.m.

After more than a year of discussion, and only two weeks from the Jan. 31 deadline of their Memorandum of Understanding, Rice and Baylor College of Medicine have ended discussions to merge the two institutions. In a joint statement between Rice and BCM sent via e-mail last Tuesday, Rice President David Leebron and BCM Interim President William Butler informed their respective communities that while no formal merger will take place, there will be future efforts to strengthen the existing relationship between the two schools. In the joint statement, Leebron and Butler left open the possibility of expanding collaborations between the institutions, such as in the neuroscience and global health initiative programs.

"While we are bringing the merger discussions to a close, we are opening a new chapter of collaboration that will advance the field of biomedicine and improve human health," the statement said.

In an e-mail, Director of News and Media Relations B.J. Almond wrote, "Rice and Baylor agreed not to do media interviews about the merger and to let the joint statement from both presidents speak for itself."

In the months leading up to the decision, students and faculty voiced their concerns, both for and against the merger, in a number of public meetings.

"I think the community took in mind that it's not a simple proposition but that it's a more complicated situation, because there are potential

benefits but also significant costs," Faculty Senate member Moshe Vardi said. "I would like to think that with this kind of scrutiny, the administration and the board are a lot more cautious in some of the decisions they make."

Vardi, a Computer Science professor, believes the atmosphere of open discussion encouraged by faculty and students in the past year allowed those involved to make better-informed decisions.

One of the larger concerns Vardi and others had was BCM's existing multi-billion dollar debt, incurred from beginning construction of its own hospital in 2007. Financial concerns played a key role in discussions throughout the process.

"BCM's key problem was they don't have a hospital," Vardi said. "A medical school needs to have a partner hospital. They split from Methodist [and later] St. Jude's Episcopal Hospital and they decided to build their own hospital instead."

In 2009, BCM announced that it planned to cease construction of its hospital after the exterior is completed this year. Vardi speculates that once the Rice administration realized conditions could not fully satisfy both institutions, the talks were dropped.

"There was disagreement over the last few months, but I think they made the right decision," Vardi said.

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KWTX-TV in Waco went so far as to suggest Baylor University may have made BCM a better offer for a merger than Rice was willing to make. Regardless, BCM and Rice appear open to further cooperative endeavors.

Some students, however, said they were disappointed with the administration's decision.

"I think ... Rice has lost out on a lot of research opportunities and as a whole, not merging will be bad for both institutions," Lovett College sophomore Matt Carey said.

Ultimately, Vardi said, the merger discussions were something that bound the university together, uniting everyone towards a common cause.

"We all believe in Rice's potential for greatness, and we all work very hard, even if we disagree on means to achieve such greatness," Vardi said.

Jocelyn Wright contributed to this article.

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