

Rice set to refocus after merger falls through

By [Josh Rutenberg](#) | Feb. 4, 2010, 6 p.m.

Reasons have begun to trickle out why Rice University and BCM failed to reach common ground under their Memorandum of Understanding last month. The two institutions ceased considerations of a merger Jan. 11, in advance of the Jan. 31 deadline set by the MOU. An e-mail notified the Rice community of the developments Jan. 12, while announcing the two schools would maintain a mutual commitment to collaborative efforts.

Responses from the Rice community have been mixed. Rice President David Leebron expressed dissatisfaction at the outcome while saying he remained optimistic about the future of Rice.

"I'm personally disappointed we were not able to achieve a merger," Leebron said. "I still believe the vision we had was a good vision, but the truth is, we could not find a good way to implement that vision at this time."

Ending negotiations

The university has not stated its reasons for ending the merger talks with BCM, though notions have been posited based on the stipulations of the MOU, such as BCM's lack of association with a private care hospital for adults.

Other theories have also cropped up. Following the end of the MOU, KWTX-TV in Waco speculated that the Rice-BCM merger had been influenced by an offer of a merger from Baylor University, which

separated from BCM in 1969. However, Leebron said external offers did not play a role in the final decision, citing financial concerns as a key factor instead.

"We would not merge without protecting the financial health of Rice," Leebron said. "Taking on a significant amount of debt would have had a consequence."

Leebron cited the Subcommittee for Academic Matters and the Subcommittee on Collaborative Activities of the Faculty Senate as being especially crucial in determining the feasibility of the merger.

During the course of the negotiations, students and faculty alike raised budgetary concerns. In an unsuccessful attempt to build its own private teaching hospital - a process that began in 2005 - BCM amassed \$900 million in debt.

"We remain enthusiastic about the [Rice/Baylor] program," Leebron said. "With [BCM] remaining independent, we hope they will continue to attach a priority to the programs we still have."

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A strengthened offer

On Jan. 21, Interim President of Baylor University David Garland

released a statement indicating Baylor and BCM were engaged in talks regarding a "strengthened affiliation" of the two institutions.

"We believe that such a strengthened affiliation could be helpful to the university's continued growth and advancement," Garland said in the statement.

However, when word spread that Baylor and BCM were considering consolidation, students, staff, faculty and alumni of BCM circulated an online [petition](#) opposing any potential merger.

"The religious ideologies that permeate throughout Baylor's academic policies may adversely affect both scientific progress and the culture at BCM, particularly in relation to issues such as evolution, embryonic stem cells and sexual orientation," the petition said.

On the day prior to BCM making a decision, the petition had 539 signatures.

Any possibility of a merger with Baylor ended when BCM declared on Jan. 27 that it would remain an independent institution. A [letter](#) from Interim BCM President William T. Butler said that BCM had decided to "continue as an independent, autonomous institution that would seek solutions to its current financial challenges outside of any additional new partnerships."

Butler also said in the statement that BCM had achieved a positive cash flow and more than \$1 billion in cash and investments.

Chairman of the Baylor Board of Regents Dary Stone notified the Baylor community in a Jan. 27 statement of BCM's plan to remain an independent institution. Baylor has since suspended talks with BCM about any possible "strengthened affiliations," Garland said in a [statement](#) released to Baylor staff, faculty and students.

However, Baylor will continue to appoint 25 percent of BCM's board

members and retains rights to the Baylor name, Stone said in his statement.

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Moving forward

Leebron said that although a Rice merger with BCM would have provided an opportunity to move the university decades ahead in the field of biomedical research, other investments, such as the BioSciences Research Collaborative, provide their own prospects for scientific advancements.

"We've recruited spectacular people, there is great student interest and we will continue to invest in those opportunities," Leebron said of the BRC.

Last July, Texas Children's Hospital became the first Texas Medical Center partner to lease space in the building. Recently, the Gulf Coast Consortia, which represents researchers in six TMC institutions, signed on to join TCH in the BRC. Through grants and a biomedical training program with the University of Texas M.D. Anderson Cancer Center, the BRC also continues to expand its collaborative efforts.

Although Rice will not acquire a medical school in the near future, Leebron said the campus should take pride in how it handled the matter,

particularly in the openness of discussions surrounding the merger.

Leebron said that as a result of the vibrant and occasionally heated discussions, the Rice community has emerged stronger, and more people will be willing to look at future opportunities that will help Rice pursue the Vision for the Second Century.

"When we look back at boldness of decisions that established the university or created new parts, all came with some level of controversy," Leebron said. "Part of the strength of the university is that it can involve people and make decisions through appropriate measures and move forward.

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