

The GW Hatchet

LEBLANC ERA NEARS END

Trustees stuck by LeBlanc as tensions grew

ISHA TRIVEDI
NEWS EDITOR

University President Thomas LeBlanc lost the confidence of many faculty, staff and students during his tenure, but one group has remained steadfast in its public support for the embattled president: the Board of Trustees.

Trustees, many of whom voted to hire LeBlanc for the job in 2017, have repeatedly commended the president's leadership during his time at GW through various statements and at Board meetings. The Board doubled down on their support through their message to the GW community after LeBlanc's departure announcement, lauding his efforts to lead the University out of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"He navigated the challenges of a pandemic with a commitment to the safety and well-being of our campus community and worked to promote diversity and improve the student experience throughout his term," Board Chair Grace Speights said in an email to the GW community Tuesday.

Trustee Madeleine Jacobs, who led the presidential search committee made up of trustees, faculty, a student and a staff member who eventually selected LeBlanc in 2017, said LeBlanc held unanimous support from the committee when officials announced he had been chosen for the position.

During his tenure, LeBlanc worked to advance many of the priorities highlighted in the Board's hiring announcement. LeBlanc made improving the student experience one of his five strategic initiatives and leveraged his computer science background to increase GW's proportion of STEM students.

As the pandemic inflamed tensions between LeBlanc and faculty, Speights continued her support for LeBlanc as they worked to solve GW's looming budget gap. Officials and trustees vowed to not tap the University's endowment to mitigate the projected deficit, citing their fiduciary duty to preserve GW's long-term financial health, instead identifying tens of millions in cuts.

Dozens of faculty had already called for LeBlanc's removal just before the pandemic hit.

Hundreds of students, faculty and staff demanded LeBlanc's resignation by September, and then-Student Association President Howard Brookins issued an executive order calling for the University community to suspend donations to GW until LeBlanc stepped down.

At the Board's open meeting the following month, Speights and Brookins openly sparred over his decision.

Speights acknowledged the growing frustrations with LeBlanc at the meeting but criticized Brookins' move as "divisive," adding that LeBlanc demonstrated "strong" leadership.

At the Board's next open meeting in February, Speights once again lauded LeBlanc's leadership, saying he had done an "outstanding job."

Speights released a statement to faculty members Wednesday stating that she had been "troubled" by some professors whose contributions have done more to "foment discord" than to contribute to civil dialogue.

"I am troubled by the actions of a faction of self-appointed faculty spokespersons whose contributions to this process more closely resemble a campaign to foment discord rather than civil dialogue," she said.

University spokesperson Crystal Nosal said the Board has begun discussing the search process for the next president, but Speights declined to say when the search will start and whether LeBlanc will be involved.



HATCHET FILE PHOTO

Higher education administration experts said LeBlanc may prioritize certain shorter term goals like increasing fundraising in his last year at GW, but his attention should turn to ensuring a smooth transition for his successor.

LeBlanc to retire at end of 2021-22 academic year

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Thomas LeBlanc will retire as the 17th president of GW at the end of the 2021-22 academic year, ending a tumultuous tenure that sparked increasing tensions with members of the University community, who ultimately pushed for his exit.

A faculty-wide survey of LeBlanc's leadership abilities – the culmination of faculty pushback – found that the majority of professors had lost confidence in LeBlanc, which came on the heels of hundreds of faculty, staff and students demanding his resignation in recent months, citing some of his most prominent leadership decisions during his nearly four-year tenure. LeBlanc said the University would be "best served" by a president who could lead GW's "long-term strategic direction" after the COVID-19 pandemic.

"The course of my presidency was disrupted by the pandemic that had to become the priority over the last 14 months; the next 14 months need to be largely focused on a transition to the 'new normal' and to completing some key initiatives," LeBlanc said in an email issued to the University community.

LeBlanc said he began conversations with the Board of Trustees at a meeting during winter break about the University's future and informed trustees during their May meeting of his plans to retire at the end of the upcoming academic year. The Board was set to decide whether to renew LeBlanc's contract in the coming weeks following a standard review of his presidency.

The Board had largely backed LeBlanc amid tensions between him and the GW community. Board Chair Grace Speights said trustees will conduct their nationwide search for LeBlanc's successor looking to invest in the University's academic infrastructure and to "build new areas of excellence."

LeBlanc arrived at GW in August 2017 from the University of Miami, ushering in bold changes through five strategic initiatives – the student experience, research, philanthropy and constituent engagement, medical enterprise and institutional culture.

LeBlanc gradually restructured various administrative units during his presidency in these areas as officials implemented a wide array of changes, including a massive review of the University's research ecosystem, the launch of a new alumni association, a restructuring of GW's relationship with the Medical Faculty As-

sociates and a complete renovation of Thurston Hall – the University's largest residence hall.

As a hallmark of his strategic vision, LeBlanc devised the 20/30 Plan, which sought to decrease the undergraduate population by 20 percent while increasing the proportion of STEM majors to 30 percent. The plan had been a major source of rising tensions during LeBlanc's tenure. It was ultimately put on hold once the pandemic hit and eventually declared likely "obsolete" based on shifting assumptions.

As classes moved online, officials pivoted to stabilizing GW's rapidly falling enrollment levels by admitting multiple rounds of students from the waitlist and tripling the transfer student acceptance rate.

Officials ultimately laid off hundreds of staff and temporarily suspended most hirings, capital projects, employee travel and other one-time expenses to bridge the gap, which further inflamed tensions.

By the fall, hundreds of members of the GW community had called for LeBlanc's resignation, citing officials' financial mitigation strategy, the 20/30 Plan, the Disney Institute partnership and other controversies – like LeBlanc's hiring of Heather Swain – as some faculty considered censuring him or taking a no-confidence vote.

Experts anticipated LeBlanc's retirement

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Higher education administration experts said University President Thomas LeBlanc's announcement that he will be stepping down next year comes as no surprise, given the ongoing tensions between him and the GW community.

Experts said university presidents tend to leave after faculty express doubts in their leadership, which LeBlanc experienced after a recent faculty survey indicated a loss of confidence in his administration. They said in his remaining year at GW, LeBlanc may choose to focus on behind-the-scenes work like boosting fundraising, or he could aim to leave on a high note by ensuring an easy transition for his successor.

Chris Bonneau, the president the University of Pittsburgh's Faculty Senate, said LeBlanc may use his last year as president to focus on managing the University with a lower profile through fundraising and other initiatives that tend to receive less public attention.

He said the faculty survey results indicated that it would have been difficult for faculty to buy into and support new initiatives from administrators if LeBlanc stayed at GW.

Victor Borden, a professor of educational leadership and policy studies at Indiana University Bloomington, said outgoing university presidents generally use their last years to streamline academic programs, diversify campus spending and tackle underlying issues. He said departing presidents tend to leave long-term planning and investments to their successor.

Borden said some administrators may leave with a University president, and some top leaders, like the provost, could apply for the head role. He said a provost would be a "good internal person" for a presidential role, depending on their relationship with the Board of Trustees and the type of applicant they look for.

Provost Brian Blake, who was a finalist for the position of president at the University of Rhode Island earlier this year and later withdrew, said in 2019 that his career goal was to become a University president within five years.

Faculty expressed concerns in 2016 about the search process and the lack of diversity on the committee that chose LeBlanc as president, which was predominantly made up of White men.

Borden said the search for a University president usually lasts between six to eight months, excluding time taken for final negotiations with the finalist candidate.

Noelle Arnold, a senior associate dean and professor of educational administration at The Ohio State University, said LeBlanc could choose to conduct listening sessions with the GW community on how the University can be improved to set up his successor for a smooth transition.

Arnold said based on recent trends across higher education, the search for a new University president may be closed to the public, instead of an open search where the list of finalists for the position are publicly shared.

Arnold said officials could also make the search process for the new president more diverse by considering candidates from historically Black colleges and universities, who university leaders from predominantly White institutions don't typically consider.

Student leaders say LeBlanc has neglected their interests

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Improving the student experience was one of University President Thomas LeBlanc's consistent talking points during his time at GW, but student leaders said his decisions leading up to his retirement announcement last week failed to prioritize student interests.

As faculty pushed back on LeBlanc's 20/30 Plan and budget cuts, many students joined calls for his resignation, emphasizing racially insensitive comments and underwhelming, dilatory progress toward environmental action as evidence of his leadership failures. In interviews, half a dozen student leaders said LeBlanc's recent announcement that he would depart GW after his contract expires comes on the heels of contentious relationships with their student organizations, marked by more than 40 student organizations' demand for his

resignation.

Student Association President Brandon Hill said LeBlanc made himself available to SA leaders through phone calls and text messages during Hill's time as president, but the student body was "looking" for more conversations with LeBlanc throughout the past four years. He said LeBlanc's lack of direct conversations with the student body may have created a "stagnant" relationship between students and administrators.

"Students are looking for more interactions with him and although they have increased throughout this time, I think that students are still craving that increased transparency," Hill said.

Hill's predecessor, Howard Brookins, had signed an executive order last September – while Hill was serving as the group's executive vice president – calling for the GW community to suspend donations to the University until LeBlanc's departure.

The move was met with criticism from the SA Senate,

which abrogated Brookins' order days later, and trustees. Hill has spent time rebuilding relationships with trustees, saying he views them as a partner.

The senate passed a resolution urging LeBlanc to resign last fall, citing nearly 30 incidents including GW's criticized partnership with the Disney Institute and the exclusion of sustainability as a pillar of his strategic plan.

Hill said he will continue to meet with LeBlanc monthly next academic year to "better the student experience" through conversations about initiatives like welcoming students back to campus. He said the installment of an 18th credit for undergraduate students in 2018 was one of LeBlanc's most impactful achievements because it allowed more students to graduate early and double major without taking on additional financial burden.

Hill said Board of Trustees Chair Grace Speights told him student input will be a "critical step" in the hiring process of the next Uni-

versity president. Hill said SA leadership previously attended focus groups and interviews with the Board when hiring LeBlanc in 2017, and he hopes to continue that collaboration next academic year.

"After speaking with President LeBlanc, it seems that next year we'll continue to go full steam ahead, and he still looks forward to hearing our ways and collaborating on ways to better the student experience, even in his final days," Hill said.

SA Sen. Cordelia Scales, SEAS-U and senate chairperson pro tempore, said the hiring of Heather Swain as the vice president for communications pushed Scales to call for LeBlanc's resignation because Swain would cause an unsafe campus environment. Swain rescinded her acceptance of GW's offer following wide criticism for shielding information at Michigan State University from investigators during the Larry Nassar sexual abuse case.

Scales said LeBlanc's 20/30 Plan to cut enrollment also "did not sit right" with

her because it would have decreased diversity within the student body.

"It probably would have made our campus much wealthier and whiter, which is an issue," Scales said. "Diversity is good. Diversity of thought is a beautiful thing. It helps us see the world as it really is."

Rising senior Joe Markus, a founding member of Sunrise GW, said members of Sunrise "never" liked LeBlanc because of the "racist" comments he made in a video discussing fossil fuel divestment and the pressure needed for him to agree to support divesting.

In the video taken by a member of Sunrise last February, LeBlanc compared support for fossil fuel divestment to hypothetical support for shooting "all the Black people here." Markus said he found the "racist" comments in the video to be "ignorant" and "harrowing," serving as a testimony to LeBlanc's character.

"There was a feeling among the members that he was never operating in good

faith with us for students or really anyone who was seeking reform to the University," he said.

The incident sparked a week of demonstrations from student activists pushing for divestment. The Board voted to begin divesting GW's endowment from fossil fuels in June.

During the past two years, Sunrise has pressured LeBlanc through protests, demonstrations and letters to divest from fossil fuels and dismantle the Regulatory Studies Center.

Sunrise called for LeBlanc to step down in September, saying the organization had no confidence in his leadership and needed to pressure him to resign in hopes of pursuing climate justice coupled with racial, gender and economic justice.

Markus said LeBlanc will be remembered as the first GW president to commit to divestment from fossil fuels, but added that he had to be "forced" into that position through a very "broad and enthusiastic" movement on campus.

News

May 24, 2021 • Page 2

THIS WEEK'S EVENTS

ASSIGNMENT RUSSIA: BECOMING A FOREIGN CORRESPONDENT IN THE CRUCIBLE OF THE COLD WAR

May 25 • 3 p.m. EDT • Free
Join journalist Marvin Kalb as he shares his experience as a foreign correspondent in Moscow during the Cold War.

POLICY CHOICES AND CONTAGION: THE COVID PANDEMIC AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS

May 26 • Noon EDT • Free
The Institute for International Economic Policy will host a discussion on policies that are made when different types of contagions occur and cause collective irrational behavior.

THIS WEEK IN HISTORY

May 26, 2020

A Board of Trustees task force issues recommendations to the full Board for GW to fully divest from the fossil fuel industry by 2025 and achieve carbon neutrality by 2030.



FILE PHOTO BY KATE CARPENTER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Faculty from non-STEM fields said they have been frustrated with the humanities taking a backseat to STEM priorities during LeBlanc's tenure.

'Demoralizing': Liberal arts faculty look back on LeBlanc's rocky tenure

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Liberal arts faculty who disapproved of University President Thomas LeBlanc's leadership welcomed his retirement announcement last week.

A dozen liberal arts professors said LeBlanc's presidency has been troubled with numerous controversies, like his now likely "obsolete" 20/30 plan to increase STEM enrollment at GW, which sparked concerns that the plan would come at the expense of non-STEM programs. They said they hope the incoming president and the Board of Trustees will collaborate more with faculty on a shared vision for the University that will restore and enhance GW's reputation.

LeBlanc announced his intention to retire at the end of the upcoming academic year last week, saying his presidency was "disrupted" by the COVID-19 pandemic. He said GW needs a successor who can focus on the University's long-term goals as it transitions back to in-person operations.

Both LeBlanc and Board Chair Grace Speights declined to comment about LeBlanc's retirement and the Board's next steps in the search for a new University president. University spokesperson Crystal Nosal said the Board has begun discussing the search process.

Kathryn Kleppinger, an associate professor of french and francophone studies and international affairs, said LeBlanc's retirement announce-

ment signaled to faculty who opposed his leadership over the past few years that their voice was finally heard. She said LeBlanc's biggest failure was his inability to listen and consider concerns from faculty, staff and students who questioned his vision, adding that "dictating" is not the way to win people over at an institution.

"In a twisted way, I think he has actually made the faculty more unified than we were before he came, but he unified us against him," she said. "He did kind of make GW great again in that sense where I see faculty who are truly engaged in the fight for the soul of GW, and he inspired us to do that by being so incredibly dismissive."

Kleppinger, who is the treasurer and secretary of the GWU Faculty Association, which has been highly vocal in their criticisms of LeBlanc, said she looks forward to and remains optimistic in working with a new president.

"One of the mantras of the Faculty Association over the past year has been 'GW deserves better,' precisely because we genuinely feel that GW is worth it, and it's worth the fight because we are so committed to the institution," she said.

Tensions between faculty and LeBlanc have escalated throughout the academic year, culminating in faculty-wide survey indicating a loss of confidence in LeBlanc's leadership abilities.

Hope Harrison, a professor of history and international affairs, said she was surprised by LeBlanc's departure, but his decision was a "huge relief" for her. She said she's relieved he is leaving GW because of his "sidelining" of the humanities combined with an overt focus on

STEM fields under his strategic plan and the controversial hiring of Heather Swain last year.

"He's brought such negative publicity to the University," Harrison said. "I can't say enough how demoralizing it's been to be a faculty member who puts everything into my job as a professor and to feel that the person at the top is sort of bringing us all down."

Andrew Zimmerman, a professor of history, said they were surprised about LeBlanc's retirement announcement because they believed the Board was unlikely to remove him from leadership. They said LeBlanc has had a "shameful" record at GW because he disregarded the University community's objections, like criticism of the Disney Institute culture survey, the Faculty Assembly's request for more data on his strategic plan and the hiring of new senior administrators— instead eliminating staff positions and freezing salaries at the onset of the coronavirus pandemic.

But Steve Charnovitz, a professor of law and the Faculty Senate's former parliamentarian, said LeBlanc has been a positive "reformist" during his time at GW, and the senate has been "unprincipled" in its actions against the president. He criticized the senate's recent faculty survey on LeBlanc's leadership and the special resolution voicing "serious concern" about him.

He said the president will be remembered for trying to fix intractable problems within the University, like solutions offering more opportunities in STEM fields, but faced enormous opposition from faculty resistant to both change and competition in higher education.

LeBlanc struggled to unite GW behind STEM push: faculty

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Despite University President Thomas LeBlanc's efforts to enhance STEM research and enrollment at GW, mathematics and engineering professors said they've been disappointed in his inability to unite the GW community behind his University vision.

LeBlanc faced mounting pressure to resign over the past year as the GW community widely opposed his controversial 20/30 strategic plan to promote STEM development at the expense of the humanities in addition to violations of shared governance principles. More than half a dozen STEM professors said LeBlanc managed the University's COVID-19 pandemic appropriately but failed to consult the wider University community about his vision to increase GW's focus on funding, enrollment and academics for STEM disciplines.

LeBlanc announced his intention to retire at the end of the upcoming academic year last week, saying his presidency was "disrupted" by the coronavirus pandemic. He said GW needs a successor who can focus on the University's long-term goals as it transitions back to in-person operations.

Both LeBlanc and Board Chair Grace Speights declined to comment about his retirement and the Board's next steps in the search for a new University president.

LeBlanc declined to

say whether he feels he has effectively accommodated both STEM and non-STEM faculty.

Harald Griesshammer, an associate professor of theoretical physics and a faculty senator, said he views LeBlanc's announcement as a "courageous" decision that will leave the University in a better position. He said LeBlanc has been unable to rally faculty behind his academic vision for GW, like his strategic plan, and his reluctance to concede to mistakes, like his racially insensitive analogy to divestment, painted him as a leader who "pushed" others rather than united them.

"He came with the best of intentions, and he was a well intentioned leader, but the way that he approached opportunities and problems were not in line with the community philosophy," he said. "In the end, he didn't understand GW all that well."

Griesshammer said faculty and students have been outspoken about their opinions and dissatisfaction with LeBlanc's leadership over the past few years, and he hopes they will "harvest" that same energy in the search for a new president. He said shared governance among administrators, Faculty Senate and Board of Trustees will be integral to the University's future, especially in light of Speights' comments last week, calling for civil discourse and not antagonism in shared governance.

"It has been easier for the faculty with LeBlanc in the leadership in order

to say what they are not standing for," he said. "Now, the faculty and the students have to actually articulate what we are standing for, so we need to be constructive, and we need to work with the Board."

Hugo Junghenn, a professor of mathematics, said GW needs a greater emphasis on STEM to remain competitive and attractive in the higher education market but added that those efforts cannot come at the expense of the humanities. He said LeBlanc's 20/30 Plan to shift resources from the humanities to STEM largely ignored faculty's input, like concerns about reducing general enrollment and making University attendance more expensive.

"Administrations aren't always keen to take the advice of faculty, and maybe sometimes they're right because they know perhaps a little bit more about the day to day dealings of the University than faculty," he said. "But nevertheless, LeBlanc's administration took the art of ignoring faculty input to a new level."

Peng Wei, an assistant professor of mechanical and aerospace engineering, said LeBlanc had a vision that supported "bigger exposure" for the School of Engineering and Applied Science in the District. Wei said he agreed with LeBlanc's plans for GW to better connect students to the local tech industry, but LeBlanc never "materialized" this vision with concrete policy or investment initiatives, only vocal support.



FILE PHOTO BY DONNA ARMSTRONG

STEM professors said LeBlanc had the right idea in placing an emphasis on advancing STEM but was unable to get the wider University community to stand behind him in this goal.

Trustees to review 'appropriate avenues' for faculty input

ISHA TRIVEDI
NEWS EDITOR

Board of Trustees Chair Grace Speights said trustees will conduct a review of the Faculty Code to determine "appropriate avenues" for input from faculty at large.

Speights said in an email to faculty Wednesday, which was obtained by The Hatchet, that she had been "troubled" by some professors whose contributions have done more to "foment discord" than contribute to civil dialogue, adding that the review will be part of a broader "comprehensive assessment" of GW's shared governance structure in conjunction with "stakeholders." Speights' email came the day after University President Thomas LeBlanc announced his departure at the end of the 2021-22 academic year following a year of rising tensions with faculty members.

"Successful shared governance relies on constructive engagement – something I believe has been lacking over the past year," she said. "I am troubled by the actions of a faction of self-appointed faculty spokespersons whose contributions

to this process more closely resemble a campaign to foment discord rather than civil dialogue."

Speights did not specify the actions by faculty that prompted her email.

The Faculty Association, an independent group of professors who have consistently opposed LeBlanc and administrators, referenced LeBlanc's departure in 35 tweets as of Thursday, some containing vulgarities and memes.

"The GW Faculty Association is gratified that the Board of Trustees and GW administration have come to agree with us and the vast majority of the GW faculty that Thomas J. LeBlanc is not the right president for our University," the group said in a statement Tuesday. "We look forward to working with the Board of Trustees, the Faculty Senate and the faculty, staff and students of the GW community in selecting a new president with a commitment to shared governance and to making GW the excellent and equitable university it should be."

Speights told faculty the Board supports faculty voices, but the process to receive faculty input should allow for "differences in opinion" through the senate as the faculty's "formal representational body."



FILE PHOTO BY JACK FONSECA

Speights told faculty the Board supports faculty voices, but the process to receive faculty input should allow for "differences in opinion" through the senate as the faculty's "formal representational body."

"With change comes the opportunity to determine the right path ahead for shared governance and to define the values that will inform our decisions," she said.

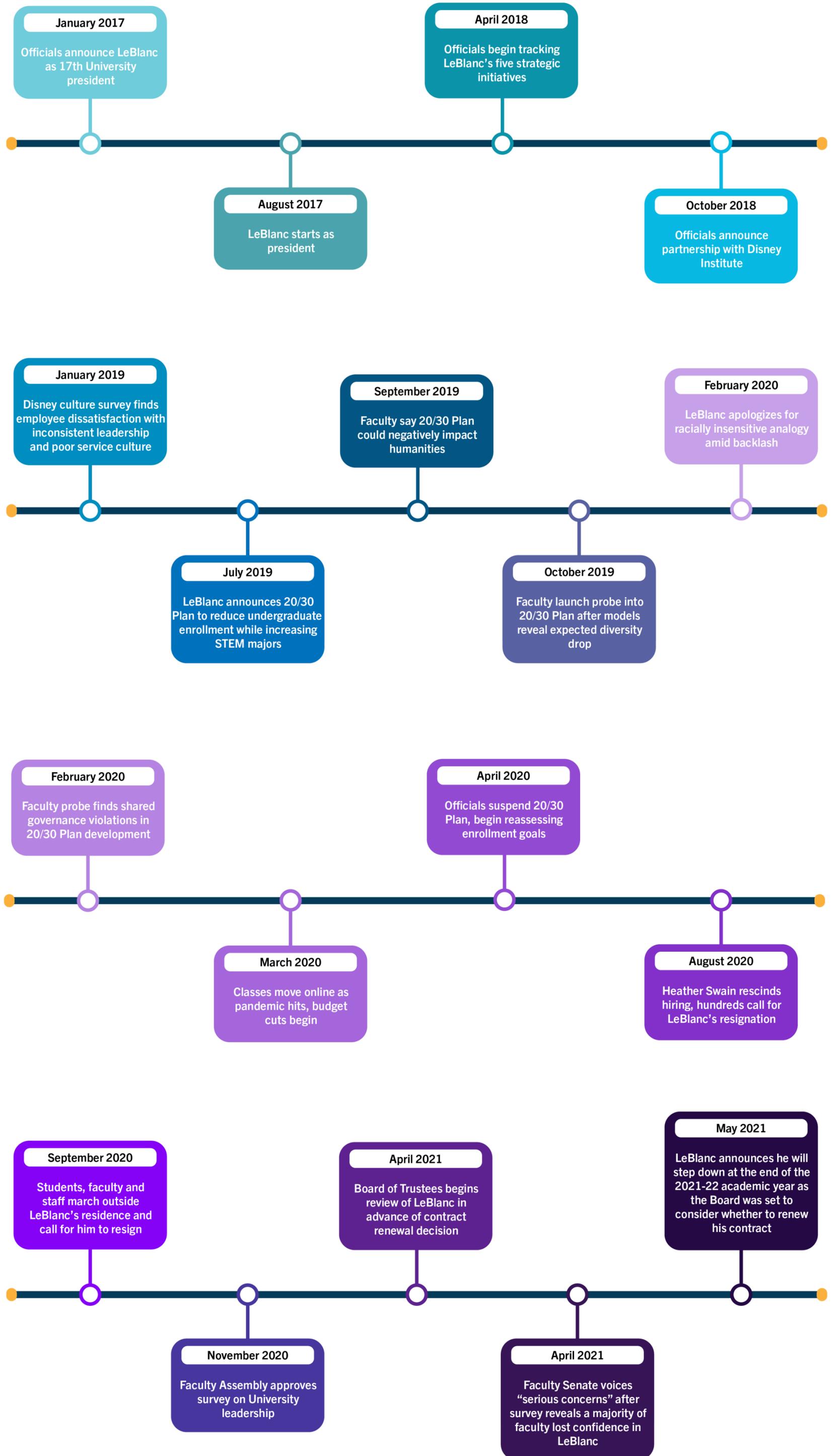
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What led up to LeBlanc's departure

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LeBlanc's leadership style should leave with him

STAFF EDITORIAL



By Staff Cartoonist

Last week, the GW community received news it had asked for but did not expect: University President Thomas LeBlanc is calling it quits. LeBlanc, who has come under fire from faculty and students alike throughout his tumultuous time in office, announced in an email to students that he will retire at the end of the next academic year.

As students, faculty and "GW Twitter" celebrate, it is worth taking stock of not just what led us to this point, but what should happen next. LeBlanc's impending retirement is unquestionably good news for students and the University community at large, but the yawning gap he created between administration and students is not going away any time soon. To prevent the next University president from becoming LeBlanc 2.0, the Board of Trustees needs to bring students and faculty to the table to pick a replacement who is genuinely receptive to the GW community.

The GW community's years-long mutiny against LeBlanc has been justified time and time again. LeBlanc has seemingly taken every opportunity to ignore or belittle the University's culture and the students who are its lifeblood. From the very beginning of his tenure, he ruthlessly set about advancing GW's STEM program at the expense of the humanities. That effort, called the 20/30 plan, would have also increased obstacles for lower-income students and dealt a huge blow to campus diversity. Neither the student body nor faculty wanted this plan – and it took the COVID-19 pandemic thrashing GW's finances to put it to a stop.

As the Board of Trustees commences its search for a replacement, they must ensure

that the next president is the anti-LeBlanc in every way possible. Whoever comes next should be invested in healing the perpetually contentious relationship between the administration and students. The next president should commit to building on GW's long-established academic culture, rather than being more interested in "building new areas

of excellence," as the Board of Trustees Chair Grace Speights wrote in an email shortly after LeBlanc's message. The position is not, and should not, be treated as a vanity project that furthers the president's personal interests over those of the community they serve, as we saw with LeBlanc's relentless push to make GW a STEM-focused school or his

decision to hire a slew of his old colleagues at the University of Miami. Instead, presidents need to be amenable to student and faculty concerns and focus on issues that the community believes are most important.

If the Board of Trustees is indeed looking for an anti-LeBlanc replacement, then an obvious point of consideration is to seek out

a racially diverse group of women candidates. But identity in itself should not be treated as a quick and easy solution. GW deserves a president who both represents the demographic makeup of the student body and one who properly looks after marginalized communities at GW. Hiring a more diverse set of faculty members and administrators and listening to concerns from students of color are just two ways to gauge a president's level of dedication to creating a more just and equitable campus environment.

The hiring process should be both transparent and take ample student input into consideration. In a staff editorial last September, we called on officials to do just that, whether by giving a student leader the ability to vote on the Board or giving faculty a say in administrative searches. The Board of Trustees could also consider creating student focus groups to discuss the qualities they desire in the next president and the direction they would like to see GW headed in to incorporate diverse voices in the search process for a new president.

Students cannot afford to spend their four years at GW criticizing the most important member of the administration for not doing the job he was hired to do. The next president must be everything that LeBlanc was not – considerate of the student body's wishes, invested in and appreciative of the long-established academic and social culture at this school and dedicated to uplifting students from historically marginalized communities. LeBlanc might be on his way out the door, but it is up to the students and faculty to insist that his abhorrent style of leadership is leaving along with him.

Op-ed: What a different message from Grace Speights might have looked like

When I read Board of Trustees Chair Grace Speights' most recent message to faculty about the Board's upcoming review of the University's shared governance model, my first thought was, "What a missed opportunity." So many other responses could have helped move our community forward, set the stage for repair and reconciliation and catalyzed a new potential for transformation.

Julia Storberg-Walker
Associate Professor

Unfortunately, we did not receive that type of message.

I teach and research leadership here at GW and am currently reading about leaders who inspire and expand possibilities for the wellbeing of all. One important book comes to mind that I hope Ms. Speights might read some day. In the book "Leading With Dignity," Harvard professor Donna Hicks describes the difference between dignity and respect. Respect is earned, and dignity – or dignity consciousness – is a "deep connection to our inherent value and worth and to the vulnerability that we all share to having our dignity violated...Dignity is the source of priceless power – it enables us to develop mutually beneficial connections to others and to create positive change in our relationships."

A message to GW's faculty, coming from a space of dignity consciousness, would have been much different from the message we received from Ms. Speights yesterday.

From this different space, this different intention, the message would have aimed to inspire us to collectively unite around our shared interest in moving forward together. For example:

Instead of "The goal is

to encourage productive discourse and collaboration through a structured and disciplined process for faculty engagement. Therefore the Board, in consultation with stakeholders, will conduct a comprehensive assessment that will begin with a clear-eyed review of the Faculty Code to determine the appropriate avenues for input from the faculty at large," a leader in dignity consciousness might have written:

"We understand these times have been challenging for all, and The Board is committed to rebuilding the relationships between faculty, staff and administration. While we might not always agree as to the cause of these relational issues, we recognize, as Board members, it is our responsibility to initiate new ways of communicating, relating and working together as one vital, diverse and respectful community. To that end, we will be reaching out to the Faculty Senate, and other faculty representatives as needed, to develop a form of shared governance that will generate positive social, academic and fiscal outcomes."

"We believe in constructive engagement and co-creating spaces for learning, trust-building and supporting the wellbeing of all members of GW's community. This includes spaces for those who disagree, those who have been elected by their faculty peers to represent diverse faculty perspectives and those who might have different worldviews or perspectives on GW's mission and vision. It is our responsibility, as Board members, to hold ourselves accountable to the full community we have been given the responsibility to lead. And, when we don't meet our intended goals of honest, timely and transparent communication – which we might not because we are

fallible humans – we are open to the feedback and the learning that our stumble might offer us. Likewise, we anticipate faculty and staff might, on occasion, not be their best selves in terms of decision making or languaging their dissenting opinions. In these instances, we intend to model responsible leadership and leverage the situation, as much as possible, for an opportunity to learn from, with and about each other more deeply."

And finally, instead of "With change comes the opportunity to determine the right path ahead for shared governance and to define the values that will inform our decisions," the message might have been:

"Our future is in our hands. We look forward to co-creating a path forward; the path may not be straight, we may often disagree on direction, and we might not know the right answer every time we need to make a decision. But we are committed to equity, wellbeing, inclusion, service and fiscal health. We will work with you to develop principles for governance, and our aspiration is to be a space where all feel a sense of belonging, value and wellbeing. Please join us in co-creating this new future."

Think of what a difference a message from a space of dignity consciousness would have made to our community. A message from that space offers hope for a better tomorrow, an invitation to participate, a commitment to learning and an understanding of and acceptance of human differences and limitations.

Maybe it's not too late for a do-over? I'm keeping my fingers crossed and hoping for a better tomorrow.

—Dr. Julia Storberg-Walker
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Op-ed: LeBlanc is leaving GW better than he found it

It is with great sadness that I learned of University President Thomas LeBlanc's decision to retire from his position at the end of the 2021–22 academic year. At the beginning of his presidency, there was a palpable excitement that he would build on the upward trajectory of excellence left to him by the administrations of predecessors Stephen Joel Trachtenberg and Steven Knapp. LeBlanc was provided by the presidential search committee with a detailed analysis which defined a series of major historical challenges that had prevented GW from joining the top tier academic institutions of the nation and limited the future trajectory of the institution.

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Over the 43 years that I have been at GW, we have adhered to the tradition of shared governance defined by the Faculty Code. The Faculty Code has been continually upgraded over the past half century in accordance with the University's needs through negotiation between the faculty, administration and Board of Trustees. The Faculty Code has always been special at GW and was considered a model for shared governance. It encouraged faculty, administration and trustees to develop plans, policies and programs that benefited the GW community, often through the Faculty Senate committee structure.

Unfortunately, the past year was a terrible aberration where the shared governance principles of the Faculty Code were disregarded. Civility, fairness and due process have too often been betrayed by some in the faculty leadership. An ill-conceived notion of shared governance emerged from a self-selected group of faculty which demanded the administration the abrogation of its decision-making responsibilities to the same group. This group successfully and mendaciously poisoned the environment of President LeBlanc's presidency through a series of unscrupulous attacks, the dissemination of misinformation and continuous public perverse criticism. It exploited the fear and uncertainty of the pandemic to breed dissatisfaction. It made it impossible for President LeBlanc to continue. As part of their modus operandi, the group used the Faculty Assembly to upend the Faculty Senate committees and the Faculty Senate itself. Internally, while extolling "shared governance", they silence dissenting voices from among the faculty – myself included. The Faculty Senate proceedings of the past year were a highly nonproductive misuse of GW governance processes designed mainly to bring down the LeBlanc administration. These actions have negatively impacted GW's reputation and have set us back substantially.

To move forward, GW must return to our

unique model based on the Faculty Code, which relies on shared governance through trust and collaboration that had served us so well for so many years. I was very gratified to read Board Chair Grace Speights' memorandum to the GW faculty of May 19 which clearly articulated these principles.

Clearly, we need a new president who will establish the long-term strategic directions of the University with the collaboration and support of the University community. The Faculty Senate should move quickly to initiate the appointment of a faculty consultative committee that can assist the trustees who will be conducting the search. A student consultative committee and a staff consultative committee would be a good addition to the processes used in the past.

Thanks to the leadership of President LeBlanc, GW is in an excellent position to continue an upward trajectory. But we are at crossroads, and must acknowledge the destructive errors made in the past year. We must move forward with a spirit of collaboration and trust between faculty, administration and trustees. I am optimistic that in GW's 201st year, we will avoid the mistakes of its 200th year and return to the positive trajectory we all aspire to.

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