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U. of Chicago President to Resign, but the Battle Over His Policies Lives On

By [BEN GOSE](#)

Chicago

Hugo F. Sonnenschein is stepping to the sidelines, but the controversy over the expansion he has planned for the University of Chicago shows no sign of abating.

Mr. Sonnenschein, the university's president since 1993, announced Thursday that he would resign in June 2000 to return to teaching. Both supporters and critics of Mr. Sonnenschein describe him as a skilled fund raiser who has helped make possible an ambitious -- and badly needed -- building program. But the former Princeton University provost also has pushed for two changes that have been sharply criticized by some students, faculty members, and **alumni** -- a reduction in the number of required courses in Chicago's fabled "Common Core" curriculum, and an expansion of the undergraduate population.

Though debates over the changes have been raging for at least three years, this spring the criticism of Mr. Sonnenschein intensified. An **alumni** group established a [World-Wide Web site](#) describing the expansion plans as a cynical effort to attract more wealthy students. Seventy-four Chicago faculty members, a small portion of the total but including some of its luminaries, sent a letter to the university's trustees, saying the university's intellectual tradition is "being put at risk by its present leadership." Ten prominent scholars from around the country sent a similar

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letter, describing the plan to revise the core as "dangerous" and "disturbing."

Meanwhile, students held a "fun-in," a parody of Mr. Sonnenschein's concern about students who focus excessively on academics. The students used "Hugo Hammers" to smash the cores of various types of fruit, and performed sketches such as "The Great Books in One Minute." And late last month, Chicago's student government released a report on the university's future, stating, "We believe there is an acute leadership crisis primarily on the level of the president."

Jerry L. Martin, president of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, a national group that advocates a traditional liberal-arts curriculum and that organized the letter-writing campaign, was thrilled by word of the resignation. "There's been a serious erosion of standards in colleges and universities, and **alumni** are beginning to fight back. It turns out they can win. This victory has important national implications."

Mr. Martin said he had been in contact with three Chicago trustees who had expressed doubts about Mr. Sonnenschein's leadership. But Mr. Sonnenschein said he was not asked to resign, and that the board had always given its full support. "I want the opportunity to do more research and teaching before I retire," said the president, who is 58 and will move to a position in Chicago's economics department. "The only way to do that was to make the change now."

Howard Krane, the outgoing chairman of the board, and Edgar Jannotta, the incoming chairman, said in a joint statement that they had "regretfully accepted" Mr. Sonnenschein's decision. "He initiated many changes to strengthen the university both academically and financially, and we deeply appreciate his commitment and leadership. The board continues to support unequivocally President

Sonnenschein's initiatives to increase the size of the College over a 10-year period while preserving the quality of undergraduate education and the excellence of our students."

"I was surprised and disappointed," said Lorna P. Straus, an anatomy and biology professor, and a spokeswoman for the executive committee of the college faculty. "I think Mr. Sonnenschein has put into place some significant things here at the university." She added: "But I can't help but believe that the pressure was great, and that he couldn't have found every day a bed of roses."

On Saturday, Mr. Sonnenschein addressed Chicago graduates who were in town for **Alumni** Weekend. He spoke proudly of several buildings that are either under construction or soon will be, including a new athletics center, which will house a swimming pool that will replace the current one, built in 1904. After the speech, he said that the expansion in the number of undergraduates -- from 3,800 to 4,500 over a 10-year period -- would improve the stream of revenue and would help make possible several pressing needs -- additional construction, better salaries for professors, and more-generous stipends for graduate students.

"What we're doing now, by every objective fact, is building a future that provides for these things," he said.

Four faculty members opposed to Mr. Sonnenschein's policies also spoke Saturday, at a roundtable discussion in Mandel Hall. Marshall Sahlins, an emeritus professor of anthropology, said Mr. Sonnenschein's depiction of Chicago as a campus in dire need of funds -- at a time when its endowment is well over \$2.5-billion -- is wrong-headed. "This is not a football poll," Mr. Sahlins said. "If you have enough money to do what you want to do, it's just as good to be 16th [in the ranking of institutions by endowment size] as

fifth."

All four professors also opposed the reduction in the core, from 21 courses to 18. The reductions, approved by faculty last year, will come in courses classified as "humanities, civilizations, and the arts" and "science and mathematics." For students who test out of a three-course language requirement, the core could slip to a total of 15 classes.

"There will be no rollback," said John W. Boyer, dean of the college and a professor of history. "We've already begun to implement those changes."

Background stories from *The Chronicle*:

- [Noted Academics Urge U. of Chicago to Preserve Its Core Curriculum](#) (4/16/99)
- [U. of Chicago Students Have Fun Making a Point](#) (4/9/99)
- [U. of Chicago Students and Alumni Protest Planned Rise in Enrollment](#) (2/26/99)
- ['U. of Chicago Social Life' May No Longer Be an Oxymoron](#) (11/15/96)

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