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## U. of Chicago President's Plan to Resign Doesn't Quiet Debate Over His Agenda

### Critics continue to attack his proposals to increase enrollment and revise the core curriculum

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 this month that he would resign in June 2000 to return to teaching economics. Both supporters and critics describe him as a skilled fund raiser who has helped make possible an ambitious -- and badly needed -- building program.

But he 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 in the size of the undergraduate population.

Though debate over the changes has raged for at least three years, the criticism of Mr. Sonnenschein intensified this spring. A Chicago **alumni** group established a World-Wide Web site, describing the expansion plans as a cynical effort to attract wealthy students. Seventy-four faculty members, a small portion of the university's total but including some of its luminaries, sent a letter to the Board of Trustees, warning that Chicago's intellectual tradition was "being put at risk by its present leadership." Ten prominent scholars from around the country followed with a similar letter to the board.

Meanwhile, about 1,700 students attended a "fun-in," a parody



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of the president's concern about students who focus excessively on academics, where they performed such sketches as "The Great Books in One Minute." And just before Mr. Sonnenschein announced his resignation, the student government, in a report on the university's future, said, "We believe there is an acute leadership crisis, primarily on the level of the president."

The former Princeton University provost, who will join Chicago's economics department next year, said in a statement that he had accomplished his goal of renewing the university's "capacity to support excellence, now and in the very long term." He added: "I have come to feel that it is time for another president, one who is less a symbol of change and who has less reason to initiate change, to carry the momentum forward."

His critics did little to disguise their glee. "I wouldn't say the 'fun-in' took down the president," said Aleem Hossain, a junior who helped organize the event. "But I would say that his resignation validates our concerns."

Jerry L. Martin, president of the **American Council of Trustees and Alumni**, the Washington-based group that organized the letter-writing campaign by prominent scholars, said Mr. Sonnenschein's decision had important national implications. "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." Mr. Martin said he had spoken with three Chicago trustees who had expressed doubts about Mr. Sonnenschein's leadership.

In an interview, Mr. Sonnenschein said that he was not asked to resign, and that the board had always given him its full support. "I want the opportunity to do more research and teaching before I retire," said the president, who is 58. "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 announcement.

"He initiated many changes to strengthen the University both academically and financially," the trustee leaders wrote. They said they would plow ahead with his plan to expand the undergraduate population from 3,800 to 4,500 over a 10-year period.

Two days after announcing his resignation, Mr. Sonnenschein spoke to about 200 Chicago graduates who were here for **Alumni** Weekend. He proudly described several construction projects, including a \$35-million athletics center that will house a new swimming pool. The current swimming facility was built in 1904, he noted, as if it were an example of financial woes.

The expansion in the number of undergraduates, Mr. Sonnenschein has maintained, will improve the university's financial standing. The current ratio of undergraduates to graduates at Chicago is roughly one-to-one, far lower than at most other private institutions, including those in the Ivy League. That ratio limits Chicago's revenue stream, because many graduate students receive free tuition plus stipends.

The additional revenue provided by the expansion will help pay for first-rate libraries, better salaries for professors, and more-generous stipends for graduate students, Mr. Sonnenschein said in the interview. "What we're doing now, by every objective fact, is building a future that provides for these things."

Four faculty members who oppose Mr. Sonnenschein's policies also spoke during **Alumni** Weekend, at a roundtable discussion in Mandel Hall. Marshall Sahlins, an emeritus professor of anthropology, said the president's depiction of the university as a campus in dire need of funds -- at a time when its endowment is well over \$2.5-billion -- was 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 expressed opposition to the reduction in the core curriculum, from 21 courses to 18. The reduction, approved by the faculty last year, will come in courses classified as "humanities, civilizations, and the arts" and "science and mathematics." For students whose test results allow them to skip the three-course language requirement, the core could shrink to a total of 15 courses.

Herman Sinaiko, a humanities professor, predicted that the reduced requirement would lead to the demise of course sequences that last for three straight quarters -- a full academic year. The year-long sequences are much more than "survey

courses," he said; they prepare students to "become independent critics of each of the major intellectual domains," including the humanities. But as such sequences wither away, the core will lose its uniqueness, becoming "something like the standard distribution requirements that exist in every college in the U.S.," he said.

But other professors noted that the number of three-quarter sequences is already declining, in part because fewer faculty members are interested in teaching them.

John W. Boyer, dean of the college and a professor of history, said the changes in the core would make it easier for students to complete the requirements by the end of the second year, rather than stretch them out until graduation. "General education is most effective when it comes in the first two years," he said.

While many student leaders have denounced the changes, it's not clear that many of their classmates share that sentiment. Next year's sophomores can choose whether to graduate under the old core or the new one. So far, about 85 per cent of the sophomores-to-be are choosing the new, reduced requirements, according to Mr. Boyer.

Nonetheless, many Chicago students continue to revel in the stereotype that they are library-shackled intellectuals. They fear that the softening of the core and Chicago's more-aggressive marketing campaign -- not to mention indulgences such as the new swimming pool -- are intended to lure more of the dread "well-rounded" students. A satirical tabloid distributed at the fun-in featured a chart projecting a sharp drop in the enrollment of "nerds" by 2005.

Michael Behnke, a vice-president who oversees admissions, rejected the notion that Chicago was going after a different type of student. He cited the university's new viewbook, "The Life of the Mind," which includes this disclaimer: "Warning: Study in this university is known to cause thinking, occasionally deep thinking. Typical side effects include mild temporary anxiety followed by profound long-term satisfaction."

"We make very clear to prospective students what kind of place we are," said Mr. Behnke, who was hired away from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1997 to improve Chicago's marketing.

The challenge, he said, is that the university is not well known among the public, even though it is highly regarded in academe. Chicago sent out a record number of brochures this year, and added additional campus-visitation programs.

So far, the effort is working. The number of applicants rose 24 per cent this year, to 6,854, and Chicago admitted only 49 per cent of them, down from 60 per cent a year ago. Average SAT scores are up. Mr. Behnke said Mr. Sonnenschein deserved much of the credit: "He hired me and made sure I had the resources I needed."

The president is also credited with getting Chicago's fund raising back on track.

Since he took over, in 1993, Chicago's endowment has risen at roughly the same rate as those of a nine-institution peer group that includes Princeton, Stanford, and Yale Universities. From 1958 to 1993, Chicago's endowment had increased at just one-sixth the rate of the peer group, after adjusting for inflation.

"Mr. Sonnenschein has put into place some significant things here at the university," said Lorna P. Straus, an anatomy and biology professor, who is spokeswoman for the executive committee of the college faculty. "Some of the things that were laid at his door" -- such as blame for the reduction in the core curriculum -- didn't belong there, she added.

But she did not fault him for stepping down now. "I can't help but believe that the pressure was great," she said, "and that he couldn't have found every day a bed of roses."

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