

President of Harvard University Lawrence Summers, center, speaks outside his office in Harvard Yard after announcing his resignation, in this Feb. 21, 2006 file photo, in Cambridge, Mass. The academic year that's winding down has been one of the most contentious in recent memory, and a brutal one for college presidents. Several high-profile leaders including Harvard's Lawrence Summers lost their jobs, while others are facing unprecedented crises, from hurricane recovery to the Duke lacrosse scandal. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer, File)
MICHAEL DWYER: AP



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Hard Year for College Presidents Ending

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BOSTON — This year, college students aren't the only ones anxious for summer. The academic year that's winding down has been one of the most contentious in recent memory, and a brutal one for college presidents. Several high-profile leaders including Harvard's Lawrence Summers lost their jobs, while others are facing unprecedented crises, from hurricane recovery to the Duke lacrosse scandal.

"This has probably been as hard a year for presidents as we've had since the Vietnam era," said Sheldon Steinbach, general counsel for the American Council on Education.

Circumstances vary, but broad themes are apparent. Often, the cast of characters includes an ambitious president, alumni and faculty who insist on being actively consulted, and a board of trustees caught in the middle _ all under the media spotlight.

Harvard's Summers got the most attention, but he was just one of several high-profile presidents to fall in recent months.

Case Western Reserve's Edward Hundert announced his resignation in March, after angering faculty and lackluster fundraising. William Cooper of the University of Richmond was toppled by an alumni revolt over his management style and comments comparing students there to "mush." The University of Maine's chancellor stepped down after four quarrelsome years, and American University fired its president in an expense-account scandal.

Other presidents still have their jobs, but their hands are full. Gallaudet University's newly chosen president is facing a revolt over her qualifications to lead the country's only liberal arts college for the deaf. In recent weeks, faculty have passed no-confidence votes in the presidents of Eastern Oregon and Indiana State universities, while a similar vote at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York narrowly failed.

Then there's New Orleans, where several colleges were almost destroyed by Hurricane Katrina and presidents including Tulane's Scott Cowen are now facing criticism from students and faculty over budget cuts. At Duke, President Richard Brodhead is confronting the national fallout from rape allegations against two lacrosse players.

Of course, with more than 4,000 degree-granting institutions nationwide, it's hardly surprising to see several college presidents have a tough time each year.

Yet many academics agree 2005-06 seemed exceptionally discordant. They also agree it's getting harder to be a successful president.

Many leaders are overwhelmed by the unrelenting fundraising demands (22 colleges are in the midst of official campaigns to raise at least \$1 billion), tripped up by big-time sports programs, or bowled over by parents and students who pay more than ever and no longer hesitate to complain about the slightest imperfections.

Many also agree on another factor behind the campus turmoil: the new, CEO-style leaders that many colleges hire, and who arrive with major agendas for reform. When people like Summers push _ and faculties push back _ the friction can be intense.

"As the academy becomes every more corporatized, as presidents are less academic leaders and colleagues and more CEOs, then faculty who retain the proud identity of an academic are going to be estranged," said Roger Bowen, president of the American Association of University Professors.

But Anne Neal, of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, says the problem is trustees caving in to faculty pressure, and failing to give presidents the support they need to impose tough-love changes like curriculum reform and holding teachers accountable for the progress of their students.

Some veterans of the job say college presidents should be held to a high standard, but worry it's become an unforgiving one.

"The slightest transgression by anybody on campus is brought to the president's threshold," said Stephen Trachtenberg, who recently _ and without any particular controversy _ announced plans to retire after 19 years as president of George Washington University. "The president is supposed to not only do a mea culpa, but fall on their sword."

Asked about how his work has changed, Trachtenberg describes a list of grievances piling up on his desk. One example: A donor has written to protest the honorary degree GW awarded to U.N. Secretary General Kofi Annan, promising not to give another nickel.

Plus, Trachtenberg adds good-naturedly, "I've got 1,500 faculty who've all got free speech. In fact, they think they have a multiplier of free speech."

Modern college presidents must be "intellectual leaders, scholars, managers, sensitive to people, knowledgeable about monetary affairs and investments, boosters of athletics, culture and dance, good with neighbors, agile fundraisers," he said. "The job description is so expansive and so unforgiving that what is impressive is there are as many people as are willing to stand up and take a shot."

And yet, plenty do. There is ample prestige, the company of erudite colleagues and perks like a free house and 50-yard-line football seats. Median compensation for presidents of research universities is about \$470,000, according to the Chronicle of Higher Education's latest survey (compensation is about half that at smaller schools). Trachtenberg's most recently released annual compensation figure was more than \$700,000. That's less than CEOs of top corporations make, but pretty good for an academic.

A Chronicle survey last fall reported 94 percent of college presidents would choose the job again.

"I have had 20 of the most privileged professional years that anybody could want," Trachtenberg said. "If I hadn't been able to do this, I would have had to be a lawyer."