

Monday

October 30, 2006

## Gallaudet Ousts Incoming President

In an abrupt reversal, Gallaudet University's Board of Trustees on Sunday dismissed Jane K. Fernandes from her position as the next president of the institution.

A [board statement](#) issued Sunday evening said that with "much regret and pain," the board had come to the conclusion that "it is in the best interests of the university to terminate Dr. Fernandes from the incoming president's position." Ever since Fernandes was appointed in May to become president, the former provost has been [the target of protests](#). In the last month, those protests have escalated to the point that the university for the deaf was [at times effectively shut down](#).

The board met at a hotel in Virginia, and as news of the decision arrived on campus, students broke out in cheers, chanting "Yes. Yes. Yes." Hundreds of students were gathered outside on the Washington campus Sunday night, toasting the news with Modelo Especial beer, cases of which materialized at the celebration. Noah Beckman, the student body president, said that he was sitting in his tent — where he is sleeping as part of the nonstop protests — when he saw students carrying signs with the news. "I stood up and my legs were shaking" from the reports, Beckman said.

The reason for the opposition to Fernandes has been much debated. Student protesters have said that she lacks the leadership traits and personal skills needed to head the world's most prominent university for the deaf.

Fernandes and her supporters have said that she was being rejected for not being "deaf enough." Fernandes, who is deaf, was raised reading lips and did not learn American Sign Language until she was in graduate school at the University of Iowa. Protesters have responded by saying that Fernandes herself has raised the "deaf enough" issue to try to portray their movement as politically correct.

Before the board's action Sunday, there was every indication that the university's leaders were not willing to abandon Fernandes. She gave an interview to [The Washington Post](#), published Sunday, about why she is not a quitter. And the Gallaudet Web site prominently featured [a press release](#) from the American Council of Alumni and Trustees urging the board to stand behind Fernandes.

[Fernandes issued a short statement](#) after she was dismissed, expressing “deep regret” over the board’s action. “I love Gallaudet University and I believe I could have made a significant contribution to its future,” Fernandes said. “I hope that the Gallaudet community can heal the wounds that have been created.”

I. King Jordan, Gallaudet’s departing president and a strong supporter of Fernandes, [released his own statement](#). In it, he praised Fernandes for “her dedication and courage and her standing up for what’s right,” and said that he was “personally saddened” that she would “not have the opportunity to show Gallaudet and the world what a great president she would have been.”

Jordan added: “The struggle during the past several months has been very painful for all of us. I am deeply troubled by the divisions among us and by the anger that overtook reason, respect, and civility.”

In 1988, Jordan became president — Gallaudet’s first deaf leader — after students erupted in protest when the university’s board selected Elizabeth Zinser as the new president. Students and deaf leaders complained then that deaf candidates had been passed over for Zinser, a hearing woman without experience in deaf education. The [“Deaf President Now”](#) movement galvanized the campus — and turned Jordan into an international hero for deaf people.

Since Fernandes was named president-elect, however, Jordan’s stock has fallen as he has repeatedly expressed support for her. Some professors remain angry that he picked Fernandes as provost without a national search and involvement by them, and many protesters have said that the search to replace Jordan was fixed to favor Fernandes. The Faculty Senate this month voted no confidence in Jordan — and protesters interviewed Sunday night on campus said that they would not support his staying on longer to deal with the leadership void.

Said Beckman: “He has to go.”

The statements from the board, Jordan and Fernandes all called for the students and faculty to try to unite. But it is unclear whether that will happen. Beckman and other protesters vowed to continue their protests until they are assured that there will be no reprisals against those who led the opposition to Fernandes.

The board statement, while expressing support for peaceful protest, fell short of student demands that they would not be punished for their protests. University officials have said repeatedly that some of the protest actions have illegally blocked activities at the university.

“The Board of Trustees respects the right of people to express their views in a peaceful manner,” the board’s statement said. “However, individuals who violated the law and Gallaudet University’s Code of Conduct will be held accountable. We expect the university to honor its long tradition of respect for each other and property and to return to normal.”

Suzy Rosen, a lawyer who once attended Gallaudet and who backs the protesters, said of the board’s statement: “That is really not cool.”

Board members and student leaders spent three hours last night to try to resolve the issue over whether any students would be punished. After the meeting, members of the board met with the protestors and stated the students would not be punished for protesting.

Michael Moore, interim provost, said after the meeting the university needs to go through a healing process. When asked if the protest had been caused over "deaf politics," as has often been charged by Fernandes and Jordan, he said, "No. It was not about deaf politics and learning to sign late in life."

One trustee, Harvey Goodstein, also denied that the protest had erupted over deaf politics as claimed by Fernandes and Jordan. "A lot of people felt that Jane [Fernandes] could not be an effective leader," he said.

Much remained unclear. The board statement was vague about the future, saying only that trustees were "continuing to meet to discuss transitional issues." Goodstein said that the board would take up the issue in future meetings.

Richard Lytle, a professor of education, said that in the wake of the last few months, it would be "a disaster" if the board kept Jordan on. Added Lytle: "The big question is: Who will pick up the process and lead this university?"

— [Scott Jaschik](#) and [Paul D. Thacker](#)