

Faulkner to step down as UT president

He'll leave legacy of bold accomplishment - not all of it popular

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By HOLLY K. HACKER / The Dallas Morning News



Larry Faulkner

When Larry Faulkner became president of the University of Texas at Austin, one of his first moves was to reopen the observation deck at the school's landmark tower – site of a deadly sniper rampage in 1966.

"Audacity – daring, surprising boldness – is a part of our cultural heritage and ought to be a part of our plans," he later told students and faculty.

Now, after seven years at the helm of one of the largest universities in the nation, Dr. Faulkner is planning to step down next year – leaving a legacy of bold choices and accomplishments.

He is expected to declare his plans this morning on campus. Officials say he will probably stay until spring or summer, when a replacement can be named.

The announcement should not be a total surprise. Dr. Faulkner, 60, has the third-longest tenure of any UT president, and if he stays into the next school year as indicated, he would become the school's second-longest-serving president. No plans to find a successor have been announced.

Supporters say that Dr. Faulkner has created a culture of openness, excellence and ambition – and will be hard to replace.

"I told him it was a sad day for the University of Texas and I was very happy for him," said Cappy McGarr, a Dallas resident, UT alumni and friend. "He has done such an extraordinary job for the University of Texas. He leaves a big legacy, and our future is better because he's been there."

Dr. Faulkner became UT's 27th president in 1998. A Louisiana native, Dr. Faulkner earned a doctorate in chemistry from UT in 1969. He taught until 1973 at Harvard University, then began a 25-year career at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Among his accomplishments, he led the "We're Texas" campaign, which raised \$1.6 billion for scholarships, professorships, buildings and more. He formed the Commission of 125 to study the university's long-term goals in academics and other areas.

After a string of ugly racial incidents on campus, Dr. Faulkner formed a group to study racial tolerance. The university recently named a new administrator to oversee diversity, which was one of the group's recommendations.

Some of his bold ideas were less popular. He argued in favor of state universities setting their own tuition rates in order to make up for lost state funds. The Legislature approved the change in 2003, and tuition has since increased 37 percent at UT. Dr. Faulkner has presided over the debate on affirmative action in college admissions. In 1996, a federal court case prevented UT from factoring race in the process. The state Legislature responded with the top 10 percent law, which says that top students in every high school can attend the public university of their choice. No school has been as affected as UT, where this fall more than 70 percent of freshmen are expected to be top 10 entrants.

Two years ago, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that race could be a limited factor in college admissions. Dr. Faulkner has said the university's hands are tied under the top 10 law, and efforts to change it failed this legislative session. At the same time, Dr. Faulkner has worked to keep the campus diverse. He launched a series of scholarships for students from underrepresented high schools.

Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas, who is at odds with Dr. Faulkner on the top 10 law, said his admiration for the president grew when he visited inner-city high schools to encourage students to attend UT.

"I've come to respect him and be able to count on his word, and that's so very important in politics," said Mr. West, who heads a Senate committee on higher education.

"He's a man of integrity. We've not always agreed, but he's never been disagreeable."

Students and alumni say Dr. Faulkner makes himself readily available to students and parents. On Tuesday night, he visited Dallas to welcome new freshmen and their families to UT. He stayed and talked until the last parent and student had left, said David Squire, president of the Texas Exes Dallas chapter.

"He wanted to make sure that everybody knew that the university, while it is a big place, has people there who care about the kids," Mr. Squire said.

Brent Chaney said that when he was student body president, he talked to Dr. Faulkner weekly or sometimes daily. And other students have had access to the president at group meetings and lunches.

Even though they weren't always on the same sides of issues – Mr. Chaney fought against the tuition increases – "his heart is always in the right place, and he worked for the betterment of students," Mr. Chaney said.