Cornell President Resigns, Citing Split With Trustees

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Jeffrey S. Lehman, the president of Cornell University, said yesterday that he would step down on June 30, after two years in the post, because of differences with the college's Board of Trustees.

Mr. Lehman announced his decision at a Cornell reunion weekend in Ithaca as he was nearing the end of a speech on the state of the university to a gathering of about 700 alumni, faculty members, trustees and other university officials.

Hunter R. Rawlings III, who preceded Mr. Lehman as president, will assume the post on an interim basis until a new president is selected, university officials said.

Mr. Lehman, 48, a Cornell graduate who was dean of the law school at the University of Michigan before becoming Cornell's president, said in a statement yesterday, "Over the past few months, it has become apparent that the Board of Trustees and I have different approaches to how the university can best realize its long-term vision."

"In light of our differences," he added, "it is best for the university that I step aside."

In a phone interview yesterday, Mr. Lehman declined to be more specific; he offered an analogy to describe his reason for stepping down. "Imagine a plane flying from New York to the beautiful island of Bali," he said. "You can get there by going east or by going west. But you can't get there if the pilot and co-pilot want to get there by going different ways."

He said that that was how he would characterize the situation between him and the board's chairman, Peter C.
Meinig. "What's best for Cornell is to have a president who's in perfect alignment with the chairman of the board," he added.

Mr. Meinig said in a statement that "much has been accomplished over the past two years, but we understand Jeff Lehman's decision and we agree that it is in the best interests of the university."

Mr. Lehman will remain a professor at Cornell's law school and will also become a senior scholar at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington.

The resignation comes at an awkward time for Cornell because it is in an early phase of a major capital campaign. The president plays a central role in making the university's case to potential donors.

Another key person in the campaign, Inge Reichenbach, the chief development official, who had been at Cornell for 25 years, left recently to take a similar position at Yale. Cornell received $386 million in gifts last year, the third-highest total among American universities after Harvard and Stanford. She said yesterday that she had resigned because she had a good opportunity at Yale and declined to say more.

Mr. Lehman said that his decision and her departure were unrelated. "This is about strategic directions, not about personnel," he said.

Cornell's provost, Carolyn Martin, said she did not believe Mr. Lehman's departure would cause a major disruption because she and he had "worked very closely together on the academic priorities of the university."

"The board is well informed and supportive" of those goals, she added, "and there is no need to miss a beat."

Elisabeth K. Boas, a 1971 Cornell graduate who heard Mr. Lehman's remarks, said that she and others had been surprised by the announcement. "To say that the room was absolutely stunned is an understatement," she said. "We were in a very hot room - it was about 80 degrees - but I got a chill."

Ms. Boas, an active Cornell volunteer who lives in Chevy Chase, Md., said that she had been impressed with Mr. Lehman. "My sense was that he was well received and..."
energizing, and that he's been well received by the alumni and staff," she said.

She said that alumni in Ithaca were asking each other what could have gone wrong.

Mr. Lehman said he was proud of his tenure as president and pointed to a 17 percent increase in applications this year, record fund-raising and a significant increase in coverage by the news media.

He said the differences between Mr. Meinig and himself had developed gradually and that they had been discussing them since early this year.

"It was a very hard decision," he said. "I loved Cornell and loved being president. It was the most exhilarating work I ever had chance to do."

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