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## In College Park, Surprise and Sadness

### Students and Faculty Lament Meaning, Manner of Announcement

*By Scott Wilson*  
Washington Post Staff Writer  
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For the University of Maryland students and faculty who lamented the sudden resignation of President William E. Kirwan yesterday, the manner of the announcement was curiously out of character.

Known for his unabashed boosterism rather than "ivory tower" detachment, Kirwan bowed out with an e-mail to the campus community after eight years as head cheerleader for a school that he toiled to make a less anonymous place.

Students and faculty strolling in shirt sleeves among Georgian-style buildings said most had heard the news from newspapers and television stations by the time Kirwan sent the message that he was leaving to take the top job at Ohio State.

"I thought it was kind of a shock," said Anne Italiano, a freshman from Baltimore. "I mean, I heard it on the news, and I go to school here."

Stephen Wallace, chairman of the Physics Departments, said he was "surprised by the surprise" of the announcement. He noted that a year ago, the administration informed the faculty when Kirwan was approached about a job at the University of California at Berkeley.

On a balmy winter day that turned College Park into UCLA East, faculty and students despaired at the departure of a man most called Brit (because his middle name is English), a teacher turned administrator who knew the value of

remembering the names of everyone, from department chairman to assistant professor to student activist.

Many said Kirwan's announcement was stunning not only because 59-year-old university presidents rarely switch jobs but also because he seemed to have such deep roots in College Park.

"He was such a fixture, and for many of us, it's hard to disassociate him from the university," said Gerald Borgia, a zoology professor at the College Park campus for 17 years. "There's this feeling among the faculty of, 'What's going to come next?'"

For three decades, Kirwan made the classrooms and administrative offices of College Park his professional home. Several faculty members said yesterday that it was Kirwan's losing battles in legislative hearing rooms, where he lobbied politicians to provide academic funds to match the university's lavish construction budget, that may have prompted his departure.

When he became president in 1989, Kirwan's agenda included burnishing the university's lackluster academic reputation, attracting better students and transforming a campus of 30,000 students into a more intimate place.

At the heart of that effort are College Park Scholars, the University Honors Program and Gemstone. The programs are designed to attract the nation's brightest students by shrinking class sizes, grouping scholars of similar academic interests and providing unique curriculums. The Gemstone program, which started this year, assigns a group of top students the task of solving a social problem during their four-year college career.

Mohamad Khairy, an electrical engineering major from Cairo, said Kirwan largely succeeded. He noted that U.S. News & World Report recently boosted the engineering school to 18th from 28th in the country in its annual rankings.

"The prestige of the university is always improving," said Khairy, who has been a student for two years.

Italiano, an honors student who majors in environmental science, agreed. "The reputation of this school was pretty bad 20 years ago. I think he's helped that a lot," she said.

Faculty members agreed that Kirwan, a former professor of mathematics, worked hard to attract the best students and keep the best faculty members. Physics chairman Wallace said Kirwan has awarded faculty raises in recent years on merit to keep the most talented.

"The feeling of momentum, that we are on the right course, has greatly improved the climate," said Wallace, who joined the College Park faculty 23 years ago. "Professors get offers, and you have to step up to keep them. This administration has been very responsive."

Students and faculty say the result has been better students arriving each year. Average SAT scores are up significantly, and for the first time, students on occasion are choosing the university over Ivy League competition.

Patrick Cunniff, a mechanical engineering professor, said: "Clearly this has happened during Brit's time. He deserves much of the credit.

"Now, of course, we have to deliver," said Cunniff, who has been at College Park since 1963. "That's our challenge."

Kirwan leaves a number of irons in the fire. In the fall, he kicked off the largest fund-raising drive in the university's history, a five-year, \$350 million effort to improve the endowment, scholarships, professorial chairs and the library system.

"He was just a very enthusiastic guy, a cheerleader for the university," Wallace said. "Ohio State is really getting a terrific president."

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