

SunSpot Top Stories

Today is Wed Jan 14, 1998 3:00 pm

[Return to story index](#)



Balance, leadership define Kirwan

College Park president is credited with raising the school's standards

By David Folkenflik

SUN STAFF

As the University of Maryland's president, William English "Brit" Kirwan maintained a delicate equilibrium, acknowledging the school's history as a parochial campus dominated by athletic concerns while encouraging its relatively recent emergence as a major national research center.

Kirwan, 59, is scheduled to announce today that he will leave College Park to become president of Ohio State University in Columbus. He has never held a job anywhere but Maryland, where he started as a junior mathematics professor 33 years ago and rose through the ranks to its highest job.

"There's not a duplicitous bone in his body," said George H. Callcott, a retired University of Maryland historian who is a chronicler of campus history. "He has stood for everything. He's in favor of athletics, higher academic standards, and diversity, teaching and research.

"Among some people, [those values] would be contradictory," Callcott said. "Kirwan just embraced them all."

A few key incidents and issues help to define Kirwan's leadership.

After the 1986 cocaine-induced death of Maryland basketball standout Len Bias, who had just been drafted by the Boston Celtics, scandal engulfed the university. Some key players were found to be only nominally attending classes, and Coach Lefty Driesell was accused of making little effort to get the situation under control.

John B. Slaughter, then-president of the university, instituted reforms, but could not salvage his presidency from the negative publicity and pressures that followed Bias' death. Kirwan, who ran the university's day-to-day affairs during the crisis, was appointed president in 1989, and he insisted on maintaining newly raised academic standards for student-athletes.

Kirwan held strong, despite the opposition of basketball coach Gary Williams and such powerful Maryland figures as state Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller, an alumnus, and members of the university system's board of regents.

During his tenure, the university raised academic standards in other ways, too. The prime example, appropriately enough, is one of addition by subtraction: The campus greatly raised the average caliber of its students by cutting back the size of its student body -- to roughly 24,000 full-time undergraduates from about 32,000 -- allowing the university to become choosier about whom it admitted.

And Kirwan has lobbied the state legislature hard for academic priorities. Last winter, he persuaded state leaders to delay the release of public funding for a proposed campus basketball arena to hasten the construction of a chemistry building.

The push for a basketball stadium, currently pegged at more than \$100 million, reflects Kirwan's politic concession to boosters like Miller who want to see the aging Cole Field House replaced rather than renovated.

Kirwan's father, A. D. Kirwan, had spent a career at the University of Kentucky, where he had been a historian, football coach, dean and, for a year, president. It was widely assumed that the younger Kirwan would do the same at Maryland, a notion that has been reinforced by his fairly long tenure as president -- more than twice the average nationally.

"Given his history, I would have thought that nothing would have gotten him out of here," said Jonathan Wilkenfeld, chairman of the department of government and politics at Maryland.

But Kirwan has appeared restless in recent years, allowing himself to be a finalist for the presidency at the University of Washington, the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Minnesota before accepting the Ohio State post.

Kirwan has spent much of his time recently dealing with recurring financial issues.

Faced in the early 1990s with a 20 percent drop in state funds when Maryland plunged into recession, Kirwan agreed to major cutbacks, including the elimination of a college, significant tuition rises and a freeze in pay for many professors and staff.

Under Gov. Parris N. Glendening, a former University of Maryland professor of political science, the 11-campus state university system, and especially College Park, has received steady, if modest, increases in recent state budgets. But those gains, which are likely to include a 6 percent or 7 percent jump this year, were hard won, professors and administrators said.

"It just takes more and more work and more and more cheerleading on the part of Brit," Wilkenfeld says. "I guess he ran out of cheer."

Originally Published on 1/05/98

[Return to story index](#)