

# SunSpot Top Stories

Today is Wed Jan 14, 1998 3:07 pm

[Return to story index](#)

Earn Miles  
Send roses

1-800-FLOWERS®

Take off

## Kirwan headed for Ohio State

College Park president expected to announce resignation this week; One of 'premier' presidents; Career in Maryland began 33 years ago as a math professor

By Marego Athans

*SUN STAFF*

William E. Kirwan is expected to announce tomorrow his resignation as president of the University of Maryland, College Park -- the campus where he built a 33-year career -- to become president of Ohio State University.

Kirwan, 59, a congenial mathematician who climbed the ranks to become an institution at College Park, has been offered the top spot at the nearly 55,000-student Ohio university, whose flagship campus in Columbus has the nation's second largest student body.

He would succeed Ohio State's E. Gordon Gee, who takes over as president of Brown University tomorrow.

Kirwan could not be reached for comment, but confirmed through a university spokesman last night that he has received Ohio State's offer and will announce his decision tomorrow. Ohio State's board chairman Alex Shumate confirmed the offer last night.

Maryland university officials, however, said Kirwan told them he expects to accept the offer tomorrow.

In Maryland, the pending move has sent a wave of lament through university and political circles -- and accolades for

Kirwan's nine-year tenure as head of the flagship of the 11-campus University of Maryland system, overseeing nearly 33,000 students.

"Brit Kirwan's departure from College Park is a personal and professional loss," said Gov. Parris N. Glendening, who taught there for 27 years. "I consider him, without doubt, one of the premier university presidents in the country."

Kirwan, nicknamed "Brit" as a play on his middle name, English, was widely lauded for boosting academic standards and luring quality professors to the school.

He started his career at College Park as an assistant math professor and was considered a friend of the faculty -- consulting them on major decisions. He worked his way up to associate professor, professor, chief academic officer and, in 1989, president, but continues to teach.

"I'm devastated," said Marvin A. Breslow, chairman of the College Park Faculty Senate.

"The whole system of how College Park is run is very much dependent on shared governance. He seeks this advice -- that's the point about Brit. It's not imposed on him. He wants the consensus of the campus, and that's helped us through some very difficult passages."

In the early 1990s, when the university was hard hit by cutbacks in promised state funds, Kirwan had to streamline academic offerings by eliminating a college, seven departments and 32 degree programs. But he kept the chins up, Breslow said.

"Through his leadership and by soliciting the advice of a large number of groups, we may have lost the money, but we came through at least in terms of morale very well," Breslow said. "We had a pretty good sense that we managed our own crisis."

Kirwan was praised for calming the campus in the aftermath of Maryland basketball star Len Bias' cocaine-induced death in 1986.

On the academic front, Kirwan promoted an honors college that has kept more Marylanders in-state for their schooling and a scholars program that allows students with

shared interests to cut across subject majors and study together.

He has pushed for more money for academic facilities and promoted the university's research endeavors to government and corporate backers.

Glendening said yesterday that he is preparing to announce a proposal to greatly increase resources for higher education, a proposal "formulated with significant input from Brit."

Lance W. Billingsley, chairman of the university system's Board of Regents, credited Kirwan yesterday with attracting top-flight professors such as former CIA chief Stansfield Turner, former U.S. Sen. Bill Bradley of New Jersey and presidential historian James MacGregor Burns, and pushing for the construction of the campus' \$102 million performing arts center, scheduled to be completed within 18 months.

"We're certainly going to be sad he's leaving. He's done an excellent job as president," Billingsley said. "He deserves the lion's share of the credit for raising the academic standards at College Park to the highest level in the history of the school and attracting to the campus world-class faculty members."

Born in Louisville, Ky., Kirwan graduated from the University of Kentucky and earned a doctoral degree from Rutgers University in 1964. That year, he came to College Park as assistant professor of mathematics; he became associate professor in 1968, professor in 1972 and math chairman in 1977.

In 1981, he was appointed vice chancellor for academic affairs, College Park's chief academic post. As vice chancellor, he raised admissions standards and increased the number of merit scholarships and graduate fellowships awarded, according to the university's Web site.

Kirwan also influenced the school's sports program. In 1989, he brought in then-Ohio State basketball coach Gary Williams to take over the Maryland program, which had been placed on NCAA probation.

In 1994, he hired Debbie Yow as athletic director at College Park -- the first female athletic director in the

Atlantic Coast Conference. Yow replaced Andy Geiger, who became Ohio State's athletic director.

In March, Kirwan met with University of California officials searching for a new chancellor for the Berkeley campus but took himself out of the running when his candidacy became public.

Billingsley said Maryland university officials plan to meet this week about a timetable for Kirwan's departure and start the arduous process of finding a new president.

"My feeling is when you surround yourself with good people, you should have the expectations that their qualifications will come to the attention of others," he said. "I always take it as a compliment when people I've worked with or worked for me advanced themselves. The fact that Brit is advancing himself is to his credit and not something we should regret or try to hold him back."

Sun staff researcher Leigh Poitinger contributed to this article

---

*Originally Published on 1/04/98*

[Return to story index](#)