

Robert Sternberg at the University of Wyoming¹

Robert Sternberg became president of the University of Wyoming in July [2013], started building a new leadership team and was gone long before he could finish. Sternberg, a renowned psychologist, had a brisk tenure as president and came to at least one solid conclusion: “As wonderful as the University of Wyoming is, it may not be the best fit for me as president,” he said in a statement last week announcing his immediate departure after four months.

--*Inside Higher Education*, November 13, 2013

Robert Sternberg

Born in New Jersey in 1949, Robert Sternberg experienced test anxiety as a child, which triggered his interest in psychology and mental abilities. After graduating *summa cum laude* from Yale, he earned a Ph.D. at Stanford, before returning to Yale in 1975 to teach in the psychology department. Sternberg stayed at Yale for 30 years, where he became the IBM Professor of Psychology and Education, and founder of the Center for the Psychology of Abilities, Competencies and Expertise. He became well-known for his Triarchic Theory of Intelligence, and for his research on cognitive styles and creativity. He served as President of the American Psychological Association, won many awards for outstanding research contributions, and earned numerous honorary degrees.

In 2005, Sternberg left Yale to become Dean of Arts and Sciences at Tufts University. In 2010, he took a position as Provost at Oklahoma State University. In a 2013 article on why he chose to go into administration, Sternberg wrote that his initiatives at Tufts and Oklahoma State were based in part on his WICS (Wisdom, Intelligence, Creativity) theory of leadership:

As a leader, one needs creativity to generate novel ideas, analytical intelligence to ascertain whether they are good ideas, practical intelligence to implement the ideas and persuade others of their value, and wisdom to ensure that the ideas help reach a common good by balancing one’s own interests with others’ interests and institutional interests over time through the infusion of positive ethical values.²

University of Wyoming

The University of Wyoming, located in Laramie, is the state’s land grant university and dates its founding to 1886. By 2013, it had grown to become a major research university, with seven schools

¹ This case was developed from public sources by Lee Bolman, University of Missouri-Kansas City, for use in the New Presidents’ Seminar, Harvard University. The case was developed for class discussion, and is not intended to illustrate either effective or ineffective handling of an administrative situation. © 2016 by Lee Bolman.

² Sternberg, R. J. “Why I Became An Administrator... And Why You Might Become One Too. Applying the Science of Psychology To The Life Of A University.” *Observer*, Volume 26 Number 9: November 2013. <http://www.psychologicalscience.org/index.php/publications/observer/2012/february-12/why-i-became-an-administrator-and-why-you-might-become-one-too.html>

(agriculture and natural resources, arts and sciences, business, education, engineering and applied sciences, health sciences, and law), some 190 majors, and approximately 13,000 students.

Sternberg is Appointed

In the Fall of 2012, the trustees of the University of Wyoming announced they were beginning a search for a new president to succeed Tom Buchanan, who was retiring after eight years in the position. Buchanan had begun his Wyoming career as an Assistant Professor in 1980, and had risen through the ranks. One aspect of the search process produced controversy and legal challenges. The trustees insisted that they could only attract a strong and deep pool if they could promise confidentiality to candidates, including the finalists. Newspapers sued under the state's sunshine law and won in court, but the university persuaded the Wyoming legislature to change the law retroactively. The controversy never completely died and one reporter wrote after Sternberg's resignation:

The whole damn thing was doomed to failure, and while the powers-that-be will insist that it was nobody's fault (or may even have the audacity to claim that things went south because of their so-called 'open' hiring process) it should be clear to anybody with half a brain that this mess is the result of an insistence on government secrecy on the part of UW— a state agency that spends billions of taxpayer dollars— and protection of the right to that secrecy by the Wyoming State Legislature.³

In February, 2013, the University of Wyoming announced that Robert Sternberg would become its 24th president. "We believe Dr. Sternberg is a great fit for UW and Wyoming, and that he will build on the excellent leadership provided by President Buchanan," said Board of Trustees President Dave Bostrom. "Collectively, we've agreed that this is the most important decision we will make during our tenure on the Board of Trustees, and every action we have taken has been made to ensure a successful outcome to this process."⁴

Sternberg was equally enthusiastic, saying: "I'm thrilled to have this opportunity to come to Wyoming and help the university continue moving toward its goal of becoming even more widely recognized as one of the top land-grant institutions in the country. Of all the places in the country, Wyoming is the one where my wife and I most wanted to go."⁵ He added that his family loved the outdoors, and were looking forward to hiking and skiing in Wyoming's mountains.

Sternberg Takes Charge

Although Sternberg said he did not anticipate major personnel changes when he took office on July 1, he decided in his first month that the long-serving provost, Myron Allen, had to go. In Sternberg's view, Allen favored too much concentration of power in the central administration and the two had different interpretations of the university's land grant mission. Allen had also been the author of a document

³ Bonnar, B. "I won't say 'I told you so' but I'm clearing my throat very loudly right now!" *Newletter Journal*, November 15, 2013. <http://newslj.com/tag/robert-sternberg/>

⁴ "UW Names 24th President: Current Oklahoma State Provost Robert Sternberg Will Assume UW Post July 1." <http://www.uwyo.edu/uw/news/2013/02/uw-names-24th-president-current-oklahoma-state-provost-robert-sternberg-will-assume-uw-post-july-1.html>.

⁵ Ibid.

arguing that the university should focus on internal candidates in hiring a new president. Sternberg asked for and got Allen's resignation.⁶ To Sternberg's surprise, three associate provosts resigned as well.⁷

In his early weeks in the office, Sternberg asked for one other resignation, that of the Dean of Education, Kay Persichitte. The story of how that came about produced concern on campus:

She received a call from the new interim provost, Dick McGinity, asking to meet. He came to her office. She asked, 'What can I do for you, Dick?' His reply, 'You can give me your letter of resignation.'" Kay Persichitte confirmed the accuracy of the story.⁸

Two other administrators – the dean of the business school and the dean of students – chose to resign during the same time period. Both took positions outside UW, but their departures added to concerns that the new president was pillaging campus administration.

Sternberg vs. the Law School

In the Fall, Sternberg announced that he was creating a task force to review programs in the college of law, with a particular focus on whether the school could do more to engage two major issues in Wyoming: energy and natural resources. The dean of the law school, Stephen Easton, announced on Halloween that he was resigning because no one had asked for his input about the task force. Easton invited Sternberg to attend an open forum at the law school. Sternberg accepted the invitation, but the meeting became confrontational.

While Sternberg had wanted a town hall-style meeting to explain the whirlwind changes at UW, including the task force, Easton told the crowd he wanted a trial-like format in which he and Sternberg would make statements and rebuttals. Easton said that at the conclusion of the trial-like meeting, students could make individual decisions about who they think is right. Easton, Sternberg and audience members debated for about 10 minutes over which format should be used.⁹

Easton was applauded by many in the audience when he stated, "'I'm prepared to lay out my case as to why you have not treated this law school ethically.'" The open meeting ended chaotically, and the news spread quickly, helping to foment new concerns on and off campus about the pace of change and the administrative turnover.

After the law school meeting, stories and rumors about chaos on campus mushroomed. Sternberg commented:

As time went on, the rumors got worse and worse. They had no basis, but I could not figure out how to control them without spreading them further. I do not think this is something special about Wyoming. This can happen anywhere and, from time to time, does. I suggested to the chair of the

⁶ Rivard, R. "Cleaning House." *Inside Higher Ed*, November 18, 2013.

<https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/11/18/how-new-president-supposed-clean-house>

⁷ Ellis, L. "After Forcing Rapid Change at U. of Wyoming, President Abruptly Resigns." *Chronicle of Higher Education*, November 15, 2013. http://chronicle.com/article/President-of-U-of-Wyoming/143065/?cid=at&utm_source=at&utm_medium=en

⁸ Nickerson, G. "Students and faculty question spate of resignations at University of Wyoming under Sternberg." *Wyofile*, http://wyofile.com/gregory_nickerson/students-and-faculty-question-spate-of-resignations-at-university-of-wyoming-under-sternberg/

⁹ Ibid.

Faculty Senate that I have a faculty advisory committee and that I have yet another town meeting to dispel rumors. But I think by that point it was too late. Things had spun out of control.¹⁰

Making matters worse was new information about the provost's earlier departure. Although Sternberg had announced that he had accepted Myron Allen's resignation "with great regret", Allen disclosed in November that he had been forced out. This raised questions about Sternberg's credibility. An emeritus professor and Sternberg critic, Peter Shive, commented:

"He said that everybody resigned, but it quickly became apparent that that was a lie," Shive said. "He explained the lie by saying, 'Well, I lied because I wanted to protect the reputation of these people.' So, that begs the question, If it's O.K. to lie in this circumstance, what other circumstances would justify his lying to his faculty?"¹¹

Although there was broad agreement at UW that the university needed to change, many criticized how the administration was handling the change. "It's his manner," said Peter Shive, "I think that most people here agree that we haven't had significant change in quite some time. So, probably, there is need for some. We may disagree on what exactly may be the best changes, I'm sure – you could say that about anywhere. But his manner of provoking this change was absolutely unacceptable to so many of us."¹²

Nicole Susan Ballenger, one of the associate provosts who resigned, agreed: "People here, like everywhere, want to be a part of their future. When they know they are being left out, disregarded, and at the same time don't understand what the change is meant to be about, they become suspicious about motives, fear takes over, and trust is lost."¹³

On Thursday, November 14, amid growing controversy on campus and in the media, the board of trustees held an all-day closed session. That evening, the board made two announcements. One was that the board supported the changes that Sternberg had made as president. The second was that he had decided to resign from the university.¹⁴

The president of the board of trustees, Dave Bostrom, insisted that Sternberg had not been asked to resign. Sternberg shared his recollection of a conversation between the two of them:

There was unrest from faculty. The faculty, some of them talked to the board about their dissatisfaction. I don't know what any individual on the board was thinking. But it sounded like from Dave [Bostrom] I no longer had 100 percent support, and I felt you can no longer do this job if you no longer have the support of all the trustees. If I don't have 98 percent, then I don't feel like I can successfully move forward. I did what I thought was best for the university and the state of Wyoming. It's not about me or a particular person. It's about what is best for the university and the state, and it's best that I not be there.¹⁵

Aftermath

In December, the board announced that interim provost Richard McGinity would also serve as interim president. A month later, in January, 2014, the board appointed McGinity as the university's 25th president, but the move was controversial. McGinity, who held MBA and DBA degrees from the Harvard Business School and had worked in investment banking before joining the UW faculty, was seen by some on campus as more businessman than academic. One newspaper reported that the "trustees bypassed

¹⁰ Rivard, op. cit.

¹¹ Rivard, op. cit.

¹² Rivard, op. cit.

¹³ Rivard, op. cit.

¹⁴ Nickerson, op. cit.

¹⁵ Ibid.

a board policy calling for additional faculty and staff input and made McGinity president. The decision chafed some faculty members.”¹⁶

In April, 2015, the Faculty Senate reported the results of a survey which found “a perceived need for greater transparency in university hiring practices and trustee appointments, a ‘marginalization’ of administrators and faculty, a lack of vision and a pervasive communication problem.” Ed Janak, the chair of the Faculty Senate, said that the campus had become a “ghost town,” with many feeling disenfranchised.¹⁷

That same month, the university announced that McGinity would return to the business faculty in June, 2016, at the end of his contract.¹⁸ Dave Palmerlee, who succeeded Dave Bostrom as president of the UW Board of Trustees, announced that the search for a new UW president would “follow an ‘open’ approach, in which finalists are publicly identified.”¹⁹ In December, 2015, the trustees announced that Laurie Nichols, then the chief academic officer at South Dakota State University, would take office as the next president on July 1, 2016. Some faculty described the open search that led to Nichols’ hiring as a “healing process” that has vastly improved relations with the UW Board of Trustees.²⁰

¹⁶ Balatsos, N. “Updated: University of Wyoming president will leave post in 2016.” *Casper Star Tribune*, April 13, 2015. http://trib.com/news/local/education/updated-university-of-wyoming-president-will-leave-post-in/article_d85df945-6e6d-508c-ac7d-500c891b0980.html

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Nickerson, G. “Laurie Nichols named 26th University of Wyoming president.” *Wyofile*, December 18, 2015. <http://www.wyofile.com/blog/laurie-nichols-named-26th-university-wyoming-president/>