Promising pairing
Proposed merger between Rice University and Baylor College of Medicine would benefit the entire city.
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With its centennial as a Houston educational institution approaching in 2012, Rice University is studying a possible merger with Baylor College of Medicine that has the potential to create a national research powerhouse.

That possibility has created a wave of excitement among alumni and professors at the private university three miles south of downtown. Many of the school's faculty members see the possible union as a boost for its prestige and research funding, since many elite research institutions also have medical schools.

An institutional marriage would also provide a valuable university affiliation for Baylor's medical school, which severed its ties to Baylor University nearly 40 years ago. Four years ago the medical school split with The Methodist Hospital, its partner for more than 50 years, over Baylor's plans to build a clinic. The school later broke with St. Luke's Episcopal Hospital after a brief pairing.

In a conversation with the Chronicle editorial board Tuesday, Rice President David Leebron characterized discussions between officials of the two schools as preliminary, but full of promise not only for their futures but also their host city.

"I think this would be pretty great for Rice, I think it would be great for Baylor, but I think the biggest winner in all this would be Houston," said Leebron.

In addition to bringing together the research capabilities of Baylor's health science departments and the hard sciences at Rice, Leebron believes there are surprising connections that can extend to studies not traditionally associated with medicine.

"Opportunities that exist in terms of the synergies between these two institutions are really pretty remarkable," he noted. "The first thing people will think of is some of the science areas, some of the engineering areas, but it's actually across the curriculum." Those tie-ins include sociology, philosophy, architecture and even music.

Baylor's merger into Rice must overcome some barriers. Rice boasts a $4.6 billion endowment; Baylor has less than a quarter that amount, raising the question of whether the medical school would be a financial burden for the university. Baylor is also in the process of building a hospital, and how it would figure into a joint operation would have to be sorted out.
While a decision on the merger is not expected quickly, Leebron hopes to have the matter settled one way or another by the end of the current academic year. While a Baylor source told the Chronicle the proposal has an 80 percent chance of becoming reality, Leebron was more cautious, describing the possibility as "not certain but well above insignificant."

In advance of its centennial, Rice has launched a $1 billion fund-raising campaign. While school officials say they already have a half billion dollars in commitments, that could be undercut by the current financial crisis. The school's investment portfolio could lose that much money in the short-term.

Whatever the financial challenges, a pairing with Baylor would certainly provide an academic boost. Rice trustee and fund-raising campaign co-chair Bobby Tudor told the Chronicle that the union "is clearly central to this whole notion of expanding our research mission." As an example, while Rice received $11 million in grants from the National Institutes of Health last year, Baylor received $211 million.

Sizing up the possibilities, Leebron concluded that pairing Baylor and Rice would produce "an extraordinarily powerful university."

It would seem these two prospective spouses are made for each other.