Rice & BCM: Point

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The Rice Thresher

We are considering perhaps the most important question this university has faced in more than 50 years: Should Baylor College of Medicine become part of Rice University? Ultimately, this is a decision that will be made by our Board of Trustees, the group charged by our charter and under Texas state law with the governance of and responsibility for our institution.

Such a decision would impact many: our present and future faculty, our students and staff, our alumni, the city of Houston, the Texas Medical Center and, of course, all of those involved with BCM. From the outset of merger discussions more than a year ago, we designed processes to hear from these groups. We have listened carefully to the full range of views and concerns of many - especially the faculty.

Why do many of us think a merger with BCM would be in the best interests of Rice?

First, it would enable us to build on collaborations that already exist between Rice and BCM and to capture additional academic synergies that are significantly harder to realize when institutions are separate. These might include building strong neuroscience, global health and medical humanities programs. A merger could also enhance our efforts in bioinformatics and health policy, and contribute to the scope and quality of the Rice undergraduate experience. These synergies, like everything we do, are not only for our own benefit, but extend much further as we seek to discover, teach and apply knowledge that will help mankind.

If the merger occurs, we will institute a faculty-guided process to identify and set the priorities for funding and developing these opportunities that are essential to a successful merger. At the same time, we also recognize that success does not mean that a majority of faculty would be engaged in medically oriented activity. Rather, we might expect that somewhere between 15 and 20 percent of our faculty would benefit from this new relationship, and information gathered from the faculty to date suggests that is indeed the case.

Second, a merger would expand Rice's intellectual scope into a field that accounts for more than 17 percent of the GDP and which is expected to be a wellspring of basic and applied knowledge in the coming century. A merger would also enable us to compete for major interdisciplinary grants in biomedical fields, where Rice is now at a strong disadvantage.
Third, as it increases our research footprint, a merger would also increase our visibility and reputation, especially in the life sciences. It would position Rice more securely for the future as one of the leading research universities in the world. Based on figures from 2007, for example, a merger with BCM would raise our ranking in federal research funding from 130th to about 23rd, just a bit behind Yale University.

Fourth, although a merger would involve financial risks, the cost of merging with BCM would be only a small fraction of what it would take to start a medical school from scratch. A merger is by far the most cost-effective opportunity for Rice to have a medical school, and indeed Baylor presents very likely the only such opportunity we will ever have. Without adding a medical school, even a lesser expansion of our research efforts in the life sciences would cost far more. The scope of philanthropic support we expect for a Rice-BCM merger would not likely be forthcoming for either of these other alternatives. And we should realize that maintaining the status quo of our relationship with Baylor is not an available alternative; even our existing relationships, such as the Rice/Baylor Medical Scholars Program, may be at risk.

Finally, a merger would serve our home city of Houston by helping and enhancing a renowned institution which is admittedly now struggling. A Rice University that includes Baylor College of Medicine would put Houston and the Texas Medical Center at the center of the biomedical research and educational map. Although our first responsibility is to Rice, we should be mindful of our chance to make a larger contribution to the world beyond our hedges.

Given these attributes, it is not surprising there has been strong support across the city and state for the merger discussions. There are also deep concerns, which must be carefully weighed in our decision. Many of these have been raised in the 90-plus meetings I have had with various parts of the Rice community, most with faculty, to discuss both the benefits and risks.

Concerns especially include the potential financial consequences, the impact on Rice's priorities and culture and the challenges of effective implementation. Based on discussions with trustees, schools, departments and individual faculty members and the work of the Faculty Merger Review Committee, we developed with the board a set of preconditions for any merger. These include, for example, a strong private adult hospital partnership for BCM and significant philanthropic and other resources. We also have required that BCM be on a path to eliminating its operating deficit, because Rice's resources cannot and will not be used to subsidize future BCM deficits.

Some faculty have argued that it would be too risky and expensive to undertake this merger on our own, and they are right; in fact, no one has ever argued that we should. When they assert that we cannot assume that the necessary resources would be forthcoming after a merger, they are also right; that is why we have spent more than a year in a process to obtain the commitments required for a merger to proceed. While Rice will, if we go forward, make a significant investment, most of the resources needed for a merger must come from outside the university.

Some have also expressed concerns about the impact on faculty and student experiences because of the
larger size of Baylor, measured by faculty or budget, for example. It’s not clear those are the relevant criteria. One need only look at the two smallest schools at Rice - Architecture and Music - whose distinctive impact is felt strongly both within and without the university.

It is understandable and appropriate that such a momentous decision for our university produces deep disagreements and vigorous debate. We must all continue to engage in this conversation in the spirit of community and civility that has been central to Rice as an institution, with respect for those who might reach differing conclusions. However, despite the magnitude of this decision, we should be careful not to overstate its impact on our campus and our faculty and students. Those of us who have been at universities with large medical schools, reinforced by our recent consultations with such universities, can say that the medical school has little impact on the large majority of faculty members who will continue their present endeavors without change.

The possibility of a merger with BCM makes many understandably nervous, as change often does. But we should be driven by our ambition and mission as a university, by our sense of history and of destiny, and not by fear. Some have suggested that a merger would cripple Rice financially and even threaten the tenure of our faculty. That is simply not true. Indeed, merger discussions have gone on for over a year precisely because we recognize the absolute necessity of being prudent, cautious and thoughtful. This possibility comes at a challenging economic time for Rice and higher education more broadly, but it is often in difficult times that such opportunities arise.

John W. Gardner once said, "We are continually faced with a series of great opportunities brilliantly disguised as insoluble problems." Over the next couple of months, we will undertake the hard work of addressing those problems to see if it is indeed possible to seize this extraordinary opportunity.

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