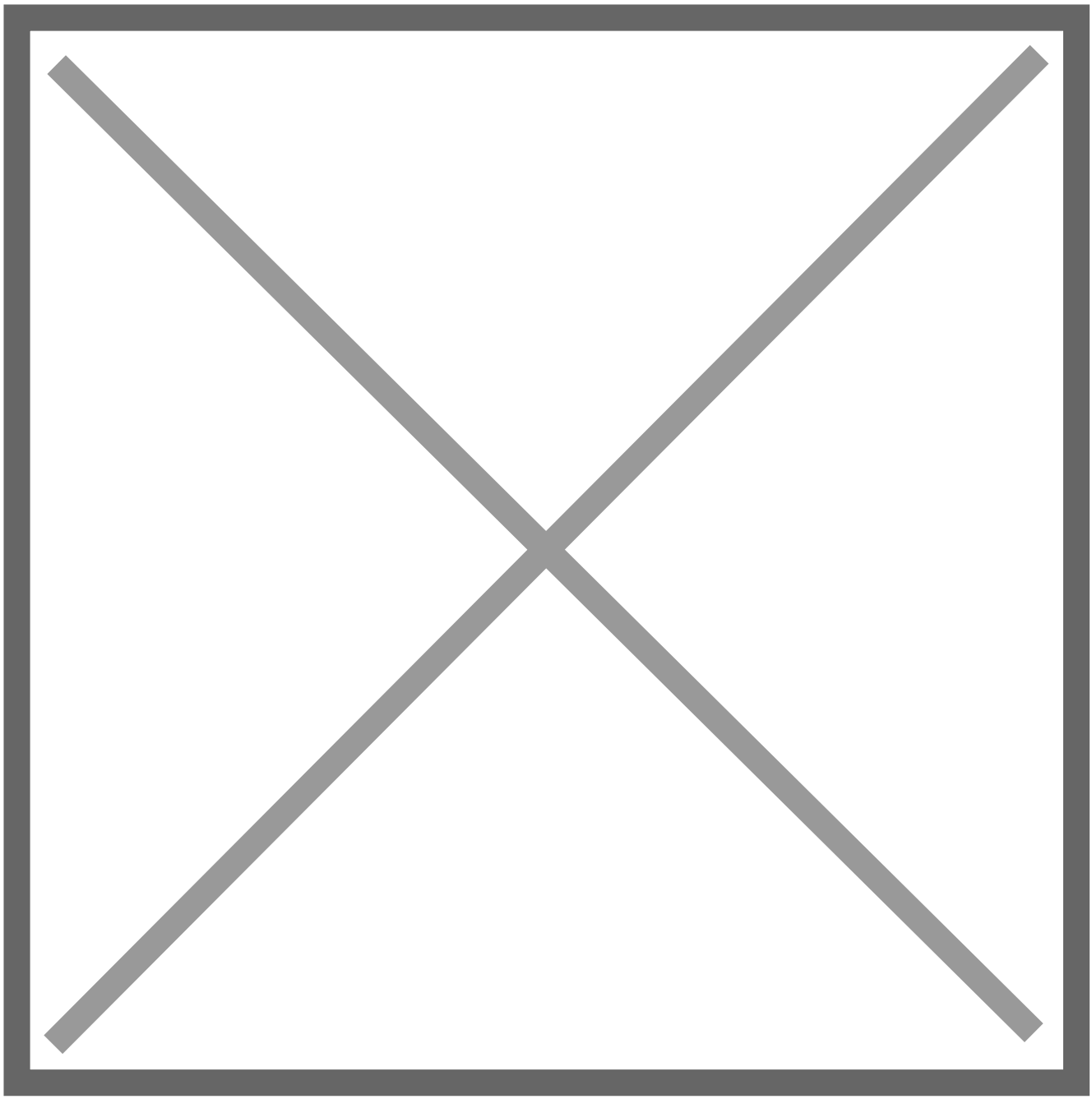
News



Shawna Cooper Whitehead, pictured in an undated photo, will become the first woman president of Jesuit-run Regis University in Denver in its nearly 150-year history on July 1, 2026. Regis announced the selection of Cooper Whitehead, currently vice president of student affairs at Jesuit-run Boston College, as its 29th president March 9. (OSV News/Courtesy of Regis University)

André Escaleira Jr.

View Author Profile

Denver Catholic

View Author Profile



OSV News

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Denver — March 17, 2026
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

In a constantly connected, on-the-go world, the new president of Jesuit-run Regis University in Denver is seeking to foster deeper connection and community — both on campus and throughout the city.

Shawna Cooper Whitehead is also making history as the first woman president of Regis in its nearly 150-year history.

The university announced March 9 that Cooper Whitehead, currently serving as vice president of student affairs at Jesuit-run Boston College, will become its 29th president on July 1.

"The Jesuit values mean something to me, about caring for the whole person, but sometimes that means caring at home, and the reason for even pursuing this opportunity is that it allows me to care for more people," she told Denver Catholic, the archdiocesan news outlet. "There's just a tremendous opportunity to see Regis into the next 150 years, and it's truly a blessing and an honor to be able to lead in

this capacity."

Cooper Whitehead, a "native Midwesterner" originally from Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, has worked in Catholic higher education for more than 20 years — a vocation she credits to her mother's faithful inspiration. Before Boston College, she served in leadership roles at several other institutions, including the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, the University of Chicago, Seton Hall University in New Jersey and Jesuit-run Loyola University Chicago.

Through every move she's made, though, has been a deep spirit of discernment and trust in God's providence.

"I've never had always a straight line of where I wanted to go, but I know that that overarching piece was to help people and how can I help people. That's been something that's really important to me throughout my entire life, whether it be volunteering as a high school student, being a student leader in undergraduate and even starting my career as an elementary school teacher," Cooper Whitehead shared. "So at each inflection point, spiritually, I'm like, how can I just help more people, and then pursue opportunities that allowed me to do that."

That practice of discernment came in handy when the opportunity to lead Regis University came knocking, she said. From the start of the process, she said she took the matter to prayer.

Advertisement

"There are a few things I do every day. I pray, I exercise, I try to read. And when I was talking with the search committee, I started with a prayer of discernment," Cooper Whitehead said. "I thought about discernment for not just the search community, but discernment for me. Is this the right move? Is this what's meant for me? Part of that faith is really having God put me where I'm supposed to be, and trying not to worry."

For the new president, this new leadership opportunity is another chance to help, serve and listen — a synodal mission in this critical moment. Recounting her time teaching a "Courage to Know" course at Boston College, in which students were invited to reflect on their identity and mission, Cooper Whitehead noted the great joy she experienced in walking with students.

"Talking to these young people and how they're exploring life, particularly post-pandemic, has been one of the most fulfilling experiences of my career. I adored our conversations, I adored the time that we spent together in community," she said. "We're not walking alone, and I think it aligns with the tradition of accompaniment and being a companion."

That accompaniment spirit extends in a special way to the Hispanic and Latino communities served by Regis, a federally designated Hispanic Serving Institution. For these students, as well as their peers from diverse backgrounds, Cooper Whitehead looks forward to building systems and processes to continue serving, always with a listening ear and an open heart.

"Part of the reason I pursued this opportunity in the first place was because it was an HSI. If we look at the Jesuit tradition of helping folks on the margins, folks who've been unheard, how we can accompany them was really an important piece," she said. "What I need most are the voices of those who are experiencing it (so that I can) then build something."

As she looks toward her official start at Regis University, Cooper Whitehead shared her excitement to continue building community among all students, faculty, staff and neighbors.

In a recent community gathering with students, she noted a powerful hope shared with her: that students "show up" for each other more, beyond athletics and at academic lectures, art shows and in the everyday.

"To me, that's what helps make a stronger community and, honestly, a sense of belonging for all because you become part of something that's bigger than yourself," she said. "So these are things that I'm thinking about as far as building systems, but also addressing some of the challenges we have."

What might that community spirit look like in reality? Cooper Whitehead put it simply:

"I would love for our students here at Regis to see a student sitting alone and be like, 'Hey, do you want some company?' or 'Do you mind if I just study with you?' That's the best part of Regis being a community that is close. That allows us to connect in a more intentional and authentic way."

Community spirit is "part of what our purpose in this world is," namely, to love our neighbor and help them, she added. "That's what makes the world a little bit smaller. It makes the word a little kinder."