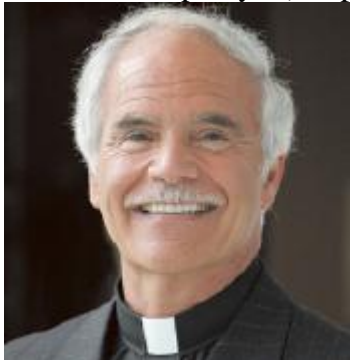


Turmoil at the top at Jesuit university

Michael Humphrey | Sep. 1, 2009



Jesuit Fr. Julio Giuliatti

Jesuit Fr. Julio Giuliatti is accepting his controversial dismissal as president of Wheeling Jesuit University in West Virginia, but one former board member is calling for an investigation into whether the local bishop was behind the ouster. Other board members are protesting that the university's bylaws were flouted during the process.

On Aug. 5, the Wheeling Jesuit University board of trustees, a group comprised of four Jesuits, fired Giuliatti hours after the larger board of directors fell two votes short of the two-thirds majority needed to dismiss him.

Before becoming president at Wheeling two years ago, Giuliatti was director of the Center for Ignatian Spirituality at Boston College and director of Georgetown University's Center for Intercultural Education and Development in Washington. Officials of Wheeling Jesuit, which has just over 1,000 undergrads, say a search for a permanent replacement will begin soon.

The trustees released no specific information as to why Giuliatti's contract was terminated, although university staff and some board members speculated that his management style, especially his decisions to replace several administrators, and a drop in the university endowment were two likely reasons.

Those opposed to the firing appealed to the Maryland Province, which includes West Virginia's only Catholic university, to overturn the decision. That will not happen, according to a province release, which stated: "Maryland Provincial James Shea supports the action of the Wheeling board of trustees and the university's efforts to move forward in a positive manner."

Giuliatti says he will not seek legal recourse to get his job back. "I don't feel it is right for me to go back to Wheeling while the same members are on the board," he said. "It wouldn't be constructive for the university."

Talk of a lawsuit has simmered down. Board member Rudolph DiTrapano, a lawyer who practices in Charleston, W.Va., said he considered legal action but after looking over the situation, he determined that remedy in the courts seems unlikely.

"The Jesuit order is not exactly a democracy," DiTrapano said. "It doesn't appear there's much recourse here."

Not everyone is so resolved.

Former board of directors member Lynda Wolford, a retired CPA and senior administrator in higher education, said she was informed by a source close to Wheeling-Charleston Bishop Michael J. Bransfield that he told certain board members, "You know you will need to fire Julio." Wolford said she is keeping the name of her source secret, in case the issue does become a legal matter. She stressed she did not know Bransfield personally.

Bransfield denied Wolford's charge in a statement to *NCR*.

"I have never communicated my opinion or my evaluation of Fr. Julio Giulietti to the board or staff of Wheeling Jesuit University," Bransfield wrote. "In fact, I have deliberately kept the office of the bishop out of any discussion regarding leadership at Wheeling Jesuit. Any board member who said that I pressured the board has never spoken to me concerning this matter."

The diocese and university have no direct financial or fiduciary ties. However, the chief financial officer of the diocese, William G. Fisher, currently chairs the board of directors. Fisher declined to comment, referring all university communication to Acting President Davitt McAteer.

Wolford, who resigned from the board of directors in protest of the Aug. 5 firing, would like to see the issue probed.

"Anyone who was terminated the way Julio was, the reasons should be exposed," she said.

Giulietti would not comment on the allegations of the bishop's involvement or their relationship. A spokesman for the bishop said he had no knowledge of the relationship between Giulietti and Bransfield.

Board of directors member Dr. Donald Hofreuter, who has a 48-year relationship with the institution, says the meeting was called too soon. He said an evaluation of the president was underway, but did not include comments from faculty, students, staff or alumni.

"I thought we should allow the whole process of evaluation to take place," Hofreuter said, "since we had requested a full review of his job performance."

According to the university bylaws, a president can be fired by a two-thirds vote from the board of directors, followed by a majority vote of the board of trustees. DiTrapano told *NCR* that the directors' meeting included no discussion, simply a motion to dismiss Giulietti, which fell approximately two votes shy, with one abstaining.

"That was it," said DiTrapano, who plans to resign from the board as well as stop contributing to the university. "As far as I was concerned Julio was still president."

Local news agencies received a press release from the trustees the next day, saying Giulietti had left the university.

Jesuit Fr. Edward Glynn, one of the four trustees, was not aware of the second meeting and, according to an e-mail he sent to a fellow trustee, Jesuit Fr. Gerard Stockhausen, he was surprised by the decision. "Since the directors did not act," Glynn wrote Stockhausen, "there was no reason for the special meeting of the trustees."

Glynn, who did not return requests for an interview, had telephoned into the directors' meeting from Pennsylvania. Stockhausen referred all questions to the university.

Acting President McAteer could not speak to the votes taken by either boards, but did comment from his own point of view on why Giulietti would have been dismissed.

"The experience base that he brought to the table as a spiritual director is not the experience base needed to operate the multiple facets of a small, but substantial-sized university," McAteer said.

Not so, says Giulietti.

"That is a very common criticism that people make about a president," Giulietti said. "But what you do as president is bring in very talented people whose life work is related to specific needs of the university. I am a leader that helps move an institution forward with a vision of where it can go in the world. That's my skill. That's how you attract people to the university. As far as finances, I'm not a CFO."

Giulietti pointed out that he inherited a \$35 million debt and a relatively small endowment of \$19 million, which dropped to \$11 million during the global financial crisis.

"That's not my fault," he said. "That's the world's fault."

Giulietti was also criticized for reassigning or asking for resignations from key administrators early in his tenure.

"He fired some administrators that were close to board members," one staff member said on the condition of anonymity. "That was not forgotten."

Giulietti said the reorganization saved nearly a half-million dollars per year. He also pointed out the chief financial officer and dean of academics he hired both became well liked and effective administrators.

Hofreuter and Wolford listed several improvements under Giulietti, including greater recruiting efforts, a successful reaccreditation process, better relations with alumni, expansion of overseas opportunities for students, and improved faculty relations with administration.

"He was making progress," Wolford said, "but it takes at least two years for those improvements to show. The bottom line is there was an urgency to terminate his contract before the benefits of his work began to appear."

McAteer says the main issue for Wheeling right now is a smooth transition into the next school year.

"Nothing is going to change at all in the classroom," McAteer said. "We are going to be ready when students begin to arrive at the end of the month."

One staff member who spoke with *NCR* on the condition of anonymity said that Wheeling is a strong institution academically, but worried about the turmoil at the top. The university has had eight presidents in its 55-year history, but will now be hiring its fourth this decade. (One president resigned due to a life-threatening illness.)

Wolford echoed that staffer's concern. "Unfortunately, I don't think that the institution will be able to survive with this kind of leadership model," she said.

The staff member was not as hopeless about the future, simply stating, "I just wish everything weren't so secretive."

Michael Humphrey, a regular contributor to NCR, lives in New York.

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