



Bill Thompson, chairman of CUNY's Board of Trustees, told POLITICO that the board set an "aggressive timetable" to have made a choice as a board by late July or early August but maintained the board is moving with all expediency. | Getty

Process to hire new CUNY chancellor faces delay

By **MADINA TOURÉ** | 10/22/2018 05:02 AM EDT

Almost a year after CUNY Chancellor James Milliken announced he would step down to make way for a successor at the beginning of the academic year, no decision has been made in a search that is now anticipated to be four months behind schedule.

CUNY's Board of Trustees does not plan to name a new chancellor until mid-December at the latest, well after the initial deadline of August announced by the university on Milliken's departure. Academic observers and CUNY leaders say the delay is due in part to a desire to find the perfect fit — and in part to the difficulties of the role of the state in city politics.

Speculation over potential chancellors has included Rudolph "Rudy" Crew, president of Medgar Evers College since 2013 and former city schools chancellor; Anthony Marx, president of the New York Public Library; Gail Mellow, president of LaGuardia Community College; and Félix V. Matos Rodríguez, president of Queens College.

But the shortlist has proved a moving target.

In early August, Marx, who was considered by many to be a favorite, announced he would remain in his current position on the grounds that he is “too committed to the mission and work of this Library to move on.”

Representatives for Mellow did not respond to requests for comment, and a spokeswoman for Queens College referred POLITICO to CUNY. It is unclear whether Mellow and Matos Rodríguez are still in the running.

Giulia Prestia, associate director of external communications and college relations at Medgar Evers College, told POLITICO that Crew was a candidate “at one point” but is “no longer in the running.”

Bill Thompson, chairman of CUNY’s Board of Trustees, told POLITICO that the board set an “aggressive timetable” to have made a choice as a board by late July or early August but maintained the board is moving with all expediency.

“By the middle of December, we should have named a new chancellor, at the latest,” Thompson said in an interview.

“You can’t do that overnight and one of the other things is they also have to be new candidates,” he added. “We weren’t going to go back through the candidates we had reviewed and interviewed before.”

Thompson said that as of now there is no short list — at least not one he was willing to disclose.

“Not gonna mention any names,” Thompson said. “There isn’t a group of finalists because we still have work and interviews to do.”

He did indicate there is strong interest from a crop of good candidates.

In February, the board named the members of the 14-member Chancellor Search Committee and announced the hiring of Isaacson, Miller, a national executive search firm.

The withdrawal of Marx appears to have been one factor slowing the search.

“I think that with [Marx] withdrawing, it did create a situation where you wanted to present a large group of individuals,” Thompson said.

Ann Marcus, professor of higher education at New York University’s Steinhardt School of Culture, Education and Human Development, said that when a top candidate withdraws, it

is “always disconcerting” in a search given that everyone was “finally reaching a consensus.”

“It was probably likely that they had chosen him or preferred him, which meant that the other candidates — it automatically makes the other candidates look less qualified,” Marcus said.

The role of Cuomo

Some advocates told POLITICO one factor in the delay could be Gov. Andrew Cuomo. He appoints 10 of the board’s trustees (Mayor Bill de Blasio appoints five) and has had a tense relationship with CUNY in the past.

Stephen Brier, a professor of urban education at the CUNY Graduate Center, said Cuomo wants to see a “closer coordination” between CUNY and the State University of New York.

CUNY preceded the founding of SUNY by nearly 100 years. The first municipal college, what would become City College, was founded in 1847. SUNY was founded in 1948.

The governor, Brier said, has much more control over SUNY, noting that its administrative office is “right down the hill from him in Albany.” CUNY, despite being mostly funded by the state, has always been “slightly independent” because it is based in New York City.

“My sense is ... the governor wants to change that and I think that this chancellors search is caught up in that,” Brier said.

He likened what he dubbed Cuomo’s “master plan” to what the late New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller set out to do in 1959 and 1960.

Rockefeller tried to integrate the two systems but was rebuffed by forces in New York City. Alumni at City, Hunter, Brooklyn and Queens colleges as well as city politicians, forced Rockefeller to create what is now known as CUNY in 1961, Brier said.

“My sense is Cuomo, like Rockefeller, was something of a kind of master builder and manipulator... he would like at some point in some way to accomplish what Rockefeller set out do,” Brier said. “Whether he can do it or not remains to be seen.”

Almost all of the trustees who hired Milliken were replaced by 2017, and the bulk of the replacements were Cuomo picks. Of the 17 trustees on the board that recruited and appointed Milliken in January 2014, only two remained when he stepped down.

Brier said a popular rumor was that Cuomo never cared for Milliken and the first time they were to meet, Milliken was “kept waiting for hours in the antechamber of Cuomo’s office and Cuomo never came out to meet him.”

Albany did not make life easy for the former chancellor, who has since been named chancellor of the University of Texas System.

In October 2016, Lisa S. Coico, the president of City College, resigned in light of a federal probe into her, the college and the college’s nonprofit foundation, which covered Coico’s personal expenses.

In November 2016, New York’s inspector general, a Cuomo appointee, issued an interim report requested by Thompson, also a Cuomo appointee, in which top officials at CUNY were accused of flouting state law when they did not report Coico’s “highly questionable personal use” of foundation funds.

Generally, the report found that mismanagement at CUNY led to “financial waste and abuse” throughout the system due to decentralization, “deficient oversight” and the failure to effectively run the university by “those who are charged with the daily operations of the CUNY system.”

The report included Milliken and Frederick Schaffer, CUNY’s general counsel and senior chancellor for legal affairs at the time, among others, in its accusations.

Critics accused the state of exaggerating its findings in a play to exert greater control.

In December 2016, members of the City Council’s Black, Latino and Asian Caucus sent a letter to Thompson expressing concerns about “wild rapid tirades of allegations and exaggerated charges” by the state, asserting Albany was engaging in a “sustained attack on the independence and leadership of CUNY.”

When Milliken stepped down, he alluded to the governor’s imprint on the board.

“The governor has appointed nine new members and the mayor four,” he wrote at the time. “These new trustees will have their own ideas about CUNY, and they should have the opportunity to help shape the leadership and agenda for the future.”

Despite the controversies, Milliken is credited with helping improve graduation rates and obtaining private scholarships for the largest number of immigrant, or DACA, students in the United States.

Marcus, the NYU professor, also pointed to increased involvement by Cuomo when Milliken was still chancellor. The governor, she said, “can be episodic about how interested he is in something.”

She dismissed the idea of integrating SUNY and CUNY as impractical, noting that the systems are very different and are already big “from a management point of view.”

Marcus suggested the threat of an overbearing governor could be scaring off potential candidates eager to have “some autonomy” in shaping CUNY’s mission and developing faculty culture; a task made more difficult “if they feel like the central people are breathing down their necks.”

“If the governor seems to be involved or his people seem to be too involved, that could discourage candidates who really want to see the university flourish,” she said.

She said the process so far seemed to be thorough, though, and not overtly political.

“It doesn’t seem that that process has been politically dominated,” Marcus said.

Thompson, a Cuomo ally whom the governor appointed in 2016, said the governor has not had a say in the process.

“The governor has stayed away from the selection process,” he said.

And he said that there has been “absolutely no discussion” about integrating CUNY and SUNY.

“The governor has put people on the board who he has faith in and who he believes can help lead CUNY forward and he’s let us do our jobs — and I include myself in that group,” Thompson said.

The governor’s office maintained that the board is conducting its own process.

“CUNY is a world-renowned university system and a critical partner in Governor Cuomo’s commitment to provide high quality, affordable education to all New York students,” Hazel Crampton-Hays, a spokeswoman for Cuomo, said in a statement. “We trust that the board will select the best person for the job to guide CUNY to new heights.”

David Bloomfield, a professor of education at Brooklyn College and the CUNY Graduate Center, suggested fiscal problems could also be hampering the search.

“A question arises [as to] whether CUNY’s severe budget problems caused by underfunding

by the state is scaring candidates off,” Bloomfield said.

CUNY said that out of its \$3.6 billion budget, 52 percent is from the state while 14 percent is from the city.

Thompson maintained that New York is one of a handful of states that has increased its commitment to higher education and that no one has communicated concerns about funding.

“Just looking at the numbers, I think the numbers have gone up in the last few years as far as what has gone to CUNY from the state and the city, but definitely from the state,” he said.

A visionary — and a politician

The next chancellor should be someone with a bold academic vision, a knack for fundraising, and demonstrated political skill, observers and officials said.

One search committee member, John Aderounmu, chairman of the CUNY University Student Senate, said he could not speak about specifics due to a confidentiality agreement. But he said the next chancellor should be someone “of a national pedigree” who can take CUNY back to the forefront of higher education, highlighting connections with other industries in addition to higher education.

He said the chancellor should believe in students not just as “clients or as numbers” but as people with “great ability to improve the city and the state and most important, the country.”

“[We need] someone who understands the diversity at CUNY,” Aderounmu said. “Someone who will try to make sure that the students that come from the lowest economic status would be given a fair opportunity to move on and climb that economic ladder.”

He said Milliken “is not really easy to replace.”

“You want someone of either the same value that Milliken brings to CUNY or if possible, more,” Aderounmu continued.

Marcus said that a chancellor would ideally be someone “who has led a complicated system somewhere” and is familiar with the issues of having “strong unions” as well as city and state politics.

Matos Rodríguez, Mellow and Crew, she contended, are “all very talented and interesting people” but none have systemwide experience.

Marx, she said, has significant experience in the public zone “in controversial times at the library” and was on several commissions on higher education.

“The fact that they wanted him at some point may mean that they feel it may be a good time to have an outsider,” Marcus said.

Barbara Bowen, president of the Professional Staff Congress — the union that represents more than 30,000 faculty and staff at CUNY and the CUNY Research Foundation — called for a candidate who can “seize the public imagination and discourse” and create “political will” for CUNY to be fully funded.

“Almost everything we struggle with at CUNY” comes down to a shortage of funds, she said.

Brier said CUNY needs a strong fundraiser, noting it used to have free tuition but now tuition is roughly one-third of CUNY’s budget.

He said that picking Matos Rodríguez or Mellow “doesn’t give you that high-level fundraising ability.”

Marx, he said, would have “brought a different profile.”

“He’s been a high-level fundraiser,” he said. “Perhaps that’s what they were most looking for.”

And, like others, Brier argued the next chancellor should be a skilled politician who can navigate the often treacherous waters of both academic and state politics.

He cited Margaret Spellings, president of the University of North Carolina; David Boren, president of the University of Oklahoma; and Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California system, as examples.

“The trend, frankly, in hiring presidents... is to look for retired politicians,” he said.