

# Chicago State board hires Vallas, former dean to top interim posts



Paul Vallas seen here at Chicago State University's board meeting on April 7, 2017, was named an interim chief administrative officer of the school. (Phil Velasquez / Chicago Tribune)

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**C**hicago State University's board on Friday appointed a former CSU dean to be the troubled institution's interim president and hired ex-Chicago Public Schools chief Paul Vallas to be a top interim administrator.

The board announced it was hiring Rachel Lindsey, who served as Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and Vallas after more than four hours in closed session.

The Far South Side public university has been plagued by financial, academic and leadership issues for years. Enrollment at the school has fallen by half since 2010, and the graduation rate has dropped to 11 percent. Hundreds of employees were laid off last year amid a financial crisis brought on in part by the state budget impasse.

Vallas, one of four trustees appointed to the board in January by Gov. Bruce Rauner, resigned earlier this month to pursue the administrative position.

Last month, state Education Secretary Beth Purvis summoned Vallas, board Chair Marshall Hatch and advisory member Tony Anderson to brainstorm a plan to put Vallas in a so-called crisis management role.

Vallas ran Chicago Public Schools from 1995 to 2001, then served as a turnaround specialist for other city school districts. The Democrat returned to Illinois politics as Pat Quinn's lieutenant governor candidate when Quinn ran unsuccessfully for re-election in 2014 — against Rauner.

Vallas was at Chicago State early in the day but left before the vote was taken. He did not immediately return a message seeking comment. Lindsey could not immediately be reached for comment.

Purvis said in a statement that Rauner "applauds Chicago State leaders for moving forward with an interim leadership team that will focus on getting the school back on track.

"We hope that this new team will make strong, decisive operating improvements in the coming days and then will create a strategic plan that puts CSU on a path to success. While we are very concerned that it took so long for the Board to make these changes, we are hopeful that there is sufficient time to do what is necessary to ensure a strong future for the school."

At the start of Friday's meeting, interim President Cecil B. Lucy made an appeal for unity at a time when he said the country, state, city and Chicago State are all divided.

"We must rebuild. We must give the students the education they pay for," Lucy said. "And we must change the public narrative in emphasizing the greatness we continue to do and the successes we continue to have."

One speaker urged the board to consider "purging" the "toxic" people who led Chicago State into its current turmoil. Two speakers asked the board to consider reappointing Thomas Calhoun Jr., the former president, who resigned after just nine months on the job, taking a \$600,000 severance with him.

Others addressed the looming decision of whether to appoint Vallas.

Michael Johnson, president and CEO of the Boys and Girls Club in Dane County, Wis., said he drove three and a half hours to speak in support of Vallas.

"Find a role he can play," Johnson told the board. "Whether it's a volunteer role, an interim (administrative) role, he deserves to be at the table to bring this university to the next level."

Not everyone supported Vallas' job application. Frank Horton, who graduated from Chicago State in 1964, stood to speak against Vallas.

"Paul Vallas wrecked Chicago Public Schools. He wrecked Philadelphia. He wrecked New Orleans," Horton said, referencing places where Vallas worked. With each proclamation, a woman in the audience replied,

"Amen!"

Horton finished his speech by exhorting the board not to "let this Bruce Rauner bring his people in to control you."

Calhoun's departure in the fall was controversial, as he was well-liked on campus. Calhoun was hired in late 2015 to replace Wayne Watson, whose six-year tenure was marked by high-profile whistleblower lawsuits, declining enrollment and low morale.

Trustee Nicholas Gowen, also a Rauner appointee, struck an optimistic note after the meeting.

"We hope these two positions combined will help stabilize the university and put us on track to find a permanent president," he said.

Officials didn't announce how long the search process would go or what Vallas and Lindsey would be paid. Gowen said salaries were being negotiated. Gowen said the board was put in a "difficult position" but took several weeks and went through a "deliberative process."

"This board acted independently of the governor. This board operated independently of community interest. But we took everyone's interests to heart," Gowen said. "It was our fiduciary duty, and we took it seriously."

Faculty members Kelly Harris and Garrard McClendon praised the moves after the meeting. Harris said the moves were "long overdue."

McClendon said he looked forward to the administration making aggressive enrollment and recruitment plans and said, "We've got two professionals in the mix now."

After the vote, Chicago State officials released a PowerPoint presentation called "Strategic Revitalization Plan," prepared by Vallas.

The document says Chicago State's "current crisis is real and urgent. The university is deeply troubled by debt, low enrollment, embarrassing graduation rates, and a reputation and protracted record of poor management."

"While Chicago's African-American community deserves better, neither the state nor the community can afford the financial and social burdens of maintaining the institution in its current condition," it reads.

The board is committed to "immediate reforms" that will succeed in substantially rehabilitating CSU's "product and its reputation," the document says.

The 37-page document lists "immediate actions to contemplate." They include:

- Assembling a team that can be immediately embedded in the finance office "to develop an actual budget and long-term financial plan," and to bring "effective financial management, accountability and transparency to the system."

- Establishing a "true partnership" with faculty.
- Developing and quickly implementing a student recruitment and retention strategy.
- Securing a state commitment for maximum flexibility on all resources dedicated and appropriated to the university ... in the form (of) an operations and capital block grant.

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