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LATEST NEWS

Tie a bow on it: Gee closing out 44 years as a college president

June 28, 2025 10:31 am by Ben Conley, The Dominion Post

MORGANTOWN — It's a scorching Tuesday afternoon in late June and the Mountainlair is vibrating with the kind of anxious energy reserved for those on the verge of what's next.

Wide-eyed moms and dads struggle to keep pace as incoming WVU students bounce from table to table, sorting out the details that will soon become their daily lives – housing, meals, classes, extracurriculars.

A few hundred feet away in Stewart Hall, a different kind of orientation is taking place.

Far less frenetic. Far more reflective.

"We're moving out of the presidential residence today," West Virginia University President Gordon Gee says, sounding slightly worse for the wear. "Let me tell you, I've collected too much stuff. That's what I've done, as a matter of fact."

Now 81, Gee is as he's always been — a caricaturist's Mona Lisa — all ears and glasses and bowtie and smile.

But his signature look, public persona and familiar, aww-shucks manner have long belied both his stature as a stalwart of modern academia and his proven willingness to rock the boat, come what may.

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WVU Medicine Video

He's the only person to have served as president of five universities, a feat made all the more impressive by the fact that he helmed two of those institutions — WVU and Ohio State University — twice.

He's conferred some 335,000 degrees, likely served as the grinning centerpiece in a similar number of student selfies and impromptu group shots, and extracted the full measure of untold Diet Dr. Peppers.

He's also built a reputation as a leader who demands the best from those around him, raises big money and leaves an indelible mark on the universities he champions.

On this day, however, he's packing — making way for Michael Benson, who will become WVU's 27th president when he steps into office on July 15.

Sitting at a makeshift work station in the conference room that abuts his now-empty office, Gee shrugs, grins, and approaches the end of an improbable 45-year run with the resigned gratitude of a survivor.

Much like the incoming freshmen next door, he, too, is on the verge of what's next.

"You know, I tell everyone I'm 36 between the ears, but I'm 81 between my ankles and elbows and my knees and my hips. So sometimes, if you can't run the university at the level you want to in terms of the energy you want to, then it's time to recognize that your time has come."



From Utah to Almost Heaven

The biography of Gordon Gee is as impressive as it is publicly available, and it doesn't need a detailed retelling here.

Hailing from Vernal, Utah, Gee distinguished himself early, achieving the rank of Eagle Scout in the Boy Scouts of America.

He turned an undergraduate degree from the University of Utah into Ivy League credentials, earning both a law degree and doctorate in education from Columbia University.

He was selected to clerk for U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Warren Burger, after which he launched his academic career at Brigham Young University.

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Then West Virginia came calling.

In his mid-30s in 1979, Gee was hired as the dean for the WVU College of Law — a job he admits he likely wasn't ready for.

He'd barely had time to settle in before the board of governors eyed him for an unexpected promotion. In 1981 he became one of, if not the, youngest university presidents in America.

"I arrived as dean of the law school, and so I was only dean for two years, and then I became president of the university. So, you know, I tell the story that I was very unprepared for being university president. I was probably unprepared for being the dean of the law school. I was very, very young. I was 36," Gee said. "It was a smaller, more regional institution at that time, but it certainly had the land-grant tradition. We did a lot at that time to really focus on the land-grant mission of the institution."

The early days of Gee's presidency were spent leaning heavily into building the university's science and engineering offerings, and both separating and expanding its agricultural and extension presence statewide.

Hospital self-help

While Gee's first term at WVU was somewhat brief — July 1981 to June 1985 — it was during this time that he spearheaded what may be his most lasting legacy — WVU Medicine.

It all started with mechanical issues in the old University Hospital.

"In 1983, we had very serious problems. We had soot blowing out of our operating suites and we realized there were serious problems with that old building. I didn't want to go to the state because I'd been forewarned that if I went to the state to ask for relief, they would move the medical center to Charleston. That was at the height of that kind of tension between Morgantown and Charleston. So, we created this not-for-profit university corporation called WVU Medicine," he said. "During that time, I raised the money for Ruby Memorial Hospital. It was not built during my time, but it was started during my time."

Today, the West Virginia University Health System, branded WVU Medicine, includes five institutes and dozens of hospitals and clinics reaching all corners of West Virginia and into neighboring states. It's West Virginia's largest employer and generates revenues well into the billions annually.

Most importantly, Gee said, it allows West Virginians to receive the kind of care that once took them far from home.

"It's grown and thrived and become, really, one of the great assets of the state. Clearly, delivering health care to every citizen now without them having to leave — making sure their children have access to great health care — it's just so important. If you want to call it a legacy ..." Gee says, pausing, "Certainly, I say it's a great result of a number of things that we've been doing."

There and back again

It's not all that common to be hired and retire from the same place.

Unheard of, really, for university presidents these days.

That's the case for Gee and WVU, at least in terms of his 44 years as a chief executive.

The twist in this tale is that most of that time was spent somewhere else — Colorado, Ohio State, Brown, Vanderbilt and Ohio State again.

In January 2014, Gee returned to Morgantown to serve as WVU's interim president while the board of governors sought a permanent replacement for the departing Jim Clements. Three months later, the qualifier was removed despite the BOG initially explaining the interim president would not be considered for the permanent post.

The vote was unanimous.

Gee was 70 years old when he returned to Blaney House, and WVU had grown from that small, regional institution 30 years earlier to a national and international player on the academic stage; well on its way to earning an R1 designation as one of the nation's top research institutions.

The school officially achieved the designation in 2016 and has maintained it since — a point of great pride for Gee.

He can rattle off a near-unending list of programs, individuals, achievements and goals that define the university as it stands today.

But perhaps more than anything, Gee's second term in office will be defined, right or wrong, by a global pandemic and the academic restructuring that followed.

"First of all, I think that we would all agree that just shutting everything down absolutely tightly was a mistake. We could have had much more flexibility than we had," he said when asked what universities should learn from COVID-19. "I think that would have made a real difference for our young people."

Gee places significant blame for the meteoric rise in mental health issues among college-age Americans on the forced isolation of the COVID response.

The result, he said, is a generation that's both uber-connected in terms of technology and lonely in terms of genuine human connection.

"The mental health challenges of these young people are really quite extraordinary. Maybe about 65% or so of them have mental health challenges, whereas 10 years ago, 15 years ago, it was 5%," he said.

Unlike the COVID response, which was largely out of WVU's hands, the decisions made in response to the university's \$45 million budget deficit in fiscal year 2024 landed squarely on the doorstep of Stewart Hall.

Significant cuts to programs, majors, faculty and staff resulted in protests and a September 2023 vote of "no confidence" in Gee from the WVU faculty.

Looking back, Gee said the decisions were necessary.

"I was on a call today with the Educational Advisory Board with about 50 university presidents. I made the point that for too long universities have tended to kick the ball down the road, and now the whole thing is coming home to roost," he said. "We did not do that. We had only a \$45 million budget deficit, but we made some important decisions. Yes, they were difficult, but more importantly, they were critical to the future of the institution. Now, we're one of the more financially stable institutions in the country, which means we can grow, we can invest and we can do the kind of things that we want to be able to do, whereas others are really struggling at the moment."

At the crossroads

While Gee readily admits that he just can't do the job with the same boundless energy that became as much his calling card as bow ties and technicolor socks, he's also quick to point out the job requires more energy than ever.

"When I became the university president, it was, you know, a fairly discreet way to run an institution. You had faculty, you had staff, you had students, you had alumni and friends, and you were pretty sanguine about keeping all those constituents in place, and, obviously, there was the legislature," Gee said. "But you fast-forward four decades, it's really hand-to-hand combat out there. There's so many headwinds facing higher education — costs, quality, demographic cliffs, the political environment in which we operate, with much more aggressive relationships between universities and their state legislatures."

Gee said universities are at a crossroads. He's long noted public faith in higher education is on a steady and prolonged decline. That slide is colliding with the ever-evolving technological revolution promised by artificial intelligence.

The result, he continued, is a shift to a physical economy in which emphasis is reverting back to the kind of hands-on skilled trades that can't yet be performed by AI and don't necessarily require the validation of higher education.

"My fear is the fact that we are so embedded in the way we've done things for so long that we will not have either the courage or the ability to change. That is a great fear for me," he says when asked if he fears for the future of higher education. "On the other hand, if we accept the challenge of change, the reinvention, the reimagination of universities, I have no fear whatsoever. It's really not based upon whether we can create a new opportunity for education. It's whether we have the will to be able to do so."

Will he stay or will he go?

"West Virginia is my home."

Gee jumps in before the question is fully formed.

"We own a home at the Greenbrier and we own a condominium here, and this will be our home," he continues. "We'll have more time to relax, more time to do some different kinds of things but we'll continue to be very meaningfully involved in the lives of the university — particularly on the economic development side and the relationship side with state government."

Gee said his kinship with West Virginia — fueled by the state's natural beauty and the mix of kindness and ready determination within its people — began the moment he arrived in Almost Heaven back in 1979.

It became an unbreakable bond in 2014, when the former president turned interim president was faced with a decision.

"I always tell the story, when I called Rebecca, my daughter, and said 'Rebecca, they asked me to stay on, what should I do?' She said, 'Go home, Dad.'"

Tags: gordon gee, university president, west virginia university



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