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EDUCATION

Fisk University officially names Vann Newkirk, Sr. the school's next president

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Nashville's oldest university officially has a new president.

Fisk University's Board of Trustees named Interim President Vann Newkirk Sr. as the university's 17th president on Feb. 5; his term is effective immediately.

Newkirk took the helm of the university after former president Kevin Rome's abrupt departure last August.

He previously served as provost at Fisk since 2018. Newkirk first worked for Fisk as a consultant in the early 2000s, when the university was in the midst of long-term struggles to improve its finances and infrastructure and later served as provost for three years at Elizabeth City State University in North Carolina before returning to Fisk.

PREVIOUSLY: *New Fisk president wants to move on after scandal: 'I don't plan to lose ground'*

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"We have had the pleasure of observing Dr. Newkirk's outstanding work both as Provost and as interim President, and this was a unanimous decision by the Board", said board chair Frank. L. Sims. in a statement Monday. "Fisk has finished consecutive years with an operational surplus and is really bucking the trend on a host of fronts in large part due to the leadership of Dr. Newkirk."

Under his tenure as both provost and interim president, Newkirk has helped launch several new programs, including programs in bioinformatics, data science and social justice.

His vision will continue to include increasing enrollment, developing elite programs, expanding corporate partnerships, improving student outcomes, and building national

awareness around Fisk's results, according to a news release.

"I am deeply honored to serve as President of Fisk University, and I am confident the best times are still to come for this remarkable Institution," Newkirk said in a statement.

In addition, Newkirk previously said he also wants to draw on Fisk's civil rights legacy.

Drawing on Fisk's social justice legacy

Founded in 1866, Fisk is the oldest university in Nashville. Newkirk tied new work on campus to the institution's long legacy as a beacon of the civil rights movement.

In July 2020, Newkirk announced the university's institute for social justice would be renamed The John R. Lewis Institute for Social Justice after the death of the civil rights icon.

MORE: *Fisk University renames social justice institute in honor of John Lewis*

Lewis, a Fisk alum, became a dominant force in the fight against segregation and racism in the Jim Crow South. He was one of many luminaries of the 1960s who studied there.

At the time, Newkirk said he hoped a new master's program in social justice and an upcoming associate degree of social justice will encourage a new generation of activists to bring their work to Fisk.

Increasing enrollment and growth

He also celebrated the increased interest students have in attending historically Black colleges and universities, thanks to recent civil rights protests such as the ones that followed the death of George Floyd last year and the election of the country's first Black female vice president.

Fisk's enrollment has grown 5% to 6% even during the COVID-19 pandemic and nearly 10% of the school's students come from outside the United States. Many of Fisk's students are out-of-state students or come from higher-income households.

Later this year, the university will also open its first new building in nearly three decades — the Roland G. Parrish Center for Career Planning and Development.

The building represents what Fisk hopes to contribute to the local community, Newkirk said previously.

"We aren't just turning out people who get a job. We are turning out students who are able to find the kind of jobs that people are looking for and are able to navigate their way up the ladder," he said. "I think what we have to work on now is that people out there know that the education we are providing is a quality education and it is the education that is needed in the world now."

Leadership turnover

Newkirk, who has served as a leader in higher education for more than 20 years, took over for Rome after the university put him on leave for pending court matters.

Rome's departure after three years continued a trend of unusually high turnover at the helm of the historically Black university. Leaders initially hoped Rome would stay for a decade or longer.

When he was named interim president, Newkirk said at the time he was interested in holding the position permanently.

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