

Neil Albert Salonen, head of the University of Bridgeport to retire next year

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The head of the University of Bridgeport announced his retirement Wednesday. President Neil Albert Salonen will leave the university, effective June 2018.

Salonen, 72, has been University of Bridgeport president since 2000. The university's ninth president, he came to the job without a background in higher education, but having served as the chairman of the university's Board of Trustees and part of that presidential search committee.

Some at the time said he took the job after others wouldn't.

"It has been my great privilege and joy to serve the University of Bridgeport and to work with the Board of Trustees, whose steadfast confidence in University of Bridgeport enabled us to reach significant milestones on behalf of our students and faculty," Salonen said in a prepared statement. "University of Bridgeport has much to be proud of, and as it looks to celebrate its Centennial Anniversary in 2027, much to look forward to."

It is expected upon retirement that Salonen and his wife will relocate to Maryland to be closer to his grandchildren.



Board of Trustee Co-Chairman Frank N. Zullo, has named Trustee Robert Bercham as chairman of a university presidential search committee. It is expected to name a firm to launch a national search as quickly as possible.

Salonen succeeded Richard L. Rubenstein, who had served as University of Bridgeport president from 1995 to 2000. Both had ties to the Professors World Peace Academy and the controversial Unification Church that provided the funding that helped keep University of Bridgeport from closing in 1991.

Sun Myung Moon, the church's leader, visited the campus several times before his death in 2012.

Supporters called Salonen highly intelligent, talented and hard working. During his tenure, University of Bridgeport has slowly grown its enrollment and programs, even as the nation's economy soured.

Salonen said he recalled "rolling up shirt sleeves" and working with trustees, faculty and other supporters to shore up deficits and steer the university in a new direction.

The university now has a balanced budget and has more than tripled its revenue, University of Bridgeport officials say.

This fall 5,658 students were reported at the university, a 4.1 percent increase over last year and the highest it has been in three decades.

The campus now has a renovated business school, nursing school and opened its first new dorm in decades last fall. The school still has a strong international population and six Fulbright Scholars are now earning graduate degrees at University of Bridgeport.

As president, Salonen became active in the Bridgeport community, serving on the Bridgeport Regional Business Council.

He co-chaired Mayor Joseph Ganim's transition team after his 2016 election. In turn, Ganim has acknowledged University of Bridgeport and was named an ex-officio member of the University of Bridgeport Board of Trustees.

His predecessor, Bill Finch, held a long-standing grudge against the university, and refused to step on campus.

"We are all proud of the great accomplishments at University of Bridgeport during Neil's tenure," Zullo, the former mayor of Norwalk, said. "It is difficult to even think of the university without Neil at its helm with (his wife) Rebecca at his side."