

Education students feared loss of their school while massive gift was in the works

AU administrators secretly planned a large private donation to the School of Education for months, even as students and the public believed the school could be dissolved.

Ben Ackman and Ava Ramsdale

On the evening of Nov. 12, 2024, 40 students stood in the Katzen Arts Center rotunda, listening to two juniors in the School of Education read an email the then-SOE Dean Cheryl Holcomb-McCoy sent that morning.

Holcomb-McCoy, who was set to leave American University in January, wrote that the school would likely undergo “massive restructuring” after her departure.

“With a university-wide deficit of over \$60 million, one of the first areas the university will likely cut is our education school,” Holcomb-McCoy said in the email. “Discussions have occurred about whether the SOE may be relocated to the College of Arts and Sciences (CAS) again.”

Although Holcomb-McCoy sent a second email to education students 23 minutes after the first one, saying they would still graduate from SOE, the SOE Undergraduate Council had convened a rapid response meeting in the Katzen rotunda to voice concern for the school's future. SOE UGC then-President Shayna Caruso and Outreach and Advocacy Coordinator Gabriela Rupp, the two juniors, presided over the meeting.

Four hours after Holcomb-McCoy's first message, Acting Provost Vicky Wilkins sent another email to education students, saying there was no plan or desire to disband SOE.

Almost four months later, University President Jonathan Alger announced on Feb. 11 that Kogod School of Business professor H. Kent Baker had made the largest philanthropic gift to AU in university history. As part of Baker's gift, SOE is set to receive permanent endowed resources and be renamed to the Linda A. and H. Kent Baker School of Education, in honor of Baker's late wife.

Distrust in administration made student leaders skeptical of administrators' promises to uphold SOE's independence. However, Baker and university administrators were planning the donation in secret for months, even as students feared



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Shayna Caruso, left, and Gabriela Rupp read written remarks to a crowd of 40 students in the Katzen rotunda. 20 more audience members watched on Zoom.

the school's dissolution.

Wilkins said in an interview that talks between Baker and administrators began in the summer of 2024 and that the gift was kept secret on a need-to-know basis. She said Baker decided the timing of the gift's announcement.

"He's a private guy, and wanted to not have this become a frenzy on campus, and not about him," Wilkins said. "He wants it to be about his wife, and so he was very careful in the way he wanted us to communicate it and start sharing the information."

In addition to a changed name, the gift will provide the school with the university's first endowed leadership chair, a new title for the school's highest ranking position. Wilkins said this may not necessarily be the dean of the school and that the exact position to be renamed depends on the size of the gift.

Wilkins said that Baker was aware of the fallout from Holcomb-McCoy's email and of an article in the Washington Post saying the school could be merged into CAS.

"I met with him and talked through our plans, and he gets it," Wilkins said. "He knows what's going on at AU, and he understands the work that needs to be done. He was supportive and continued on the gift."

Baker said in an email that his gift is unrelated to SOE's organizational future, and that he has not been involved in discussions on the matter.

In her Nov. 12, 2024, follow-up email, Holcomb-McCoy had said the only things under consideration were the school's location and other structural changes. She also said she apologized for any misunderstanding.

In their initial call to action at the meeting in Katzen, Rupp said the ambiguity in Wilkins's email meant they could not accept university administrators' promise of SOE's continued independence at face value.

"The provost and the university admin have a vested interest in us believing that this so-called restructuring is not a closing or a dissolution of the school," Rupp said. "We are not comfortable accepting this language of 'restructuring.'"

Four students wrote letters to university administrators after the meeting, urging them to reconsider absorbing SOE into CAS. A petition for the school's independence launched on Nov. 12, 2024, received 858 signatures.

Holcomb-McCoy's message came weeks after the reelection of President Donald Trump, who said in an August 2024 interview with Elon Musk that he would like to close the Department of Education. She wrote in her initial email that the news of SOE's restructuring paralleled Trump's threat.



Shayna Caruso, right, and Gabriela Rupp address students at the rapid response meeting on Nov. 12, 2024. (Ben Ackman)

From November 2024 to February, university administrators continually denied that SOE's independence or academic programs were in danger. Three days after Wilkins's email on Nov. 12, 2024, Scott Gilbert, the SOE faculty affairs coordinator, sent an email to education students reiterating that the school would not be closed and none of its programs would be dissolved.

Matt Bennett, AU's vice president and chief communications officer, said any restructuring under consideration was solely administrative.

"And importantly—and this is fundamentally important—what is not changing are the academic programs, the faculty, the research, the student, educational opportunities, the degrees that students are pursuing right now, all that will continue," Bennett said.

Asher Heisten, a former AU Student Government senator who was cosponsoring legislation related to SOE's campus, attended the meeting in Katzen. Heisten, a sophomore studying political science, said in February that at the time of the meeting, he did not believe the school's promises to preserve programs.

"The only thing that I will ever trust from administration is when they say something will get cut down on or a bad decision will be made," Heisten said.

Wilkins said planned changes to SOE were mainly centered on "shared services," or workforce changes meant to consolidate staff between schools and clarify boundaries between roles.

She said the changes might result in staff members doing administrative work for two schools instead of one, or in the creation of specialized roles to redistribute responsibilities across employees.

"At the time when it all came out, and there was all this talk about it, I think there was a fear that it was about cutting programs or students or faculty, and immediately I went out and had conversations," Wilkins said. "This is to not do those things."

She said the deans had met to discuss shared services over the past 18 months, but Holcomb-McCoy was not present at these meetings because she was on sabbatical at the time.

During Holcomb-McCoy's sabbatical, professors Rodney Hopson and Corbin Campbell were the interim co-deans. Wilkins said they represented Holcomb-McCoy in the discussion on shared services.

Holcomb-McCoy left AU in January to become president and CEO of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

In Holcomb-McCoy's absence, Hopson now again serves as interim dean. He said he had no knowledge of how Holcomb-McCoy received the information that SOE might lose its independence.

Holcomb-McCoy was dean of SOE when it became independent from CAS in 2019, according to a memo announcing the separation. According to a memo announcing her departure, the SOE student body grew sixfold under her leadership.

Janae Blanscet, Holcomb-McCoy's special assistant at the Association, declined on her behalf to comment. She said requests for comment should be directed to Hopson.

Hopson said he became aware of the gift once he became SOE's interim dean for the second time in January.

Hopson is a member of the SOE task force, a working group of SOE stakeholders that coordinates the school's self-advocacy. While Wilkins formally announced its creation in her Dec. 12, 2024, message, the formation of a working group was mentioned as early as Gilbert's Nov. 15, 2024, email.

The working group, known in full as the Optimal, Efficient and Sustainable Independence Task Force, is comprised of 18 members from 17 constituencies of the SOE community, including undergraduates, graduate students, tenure track faculty, term faculty and staff, according to a list of task force members provided by current SOE UGC President Anna Russell.

Hopson said the task force allows the entire SOE community to be represented in discussions of the school's priorities. He said it arose from a need to reclaim control of SOE's future.

"It was being lost, the good work, the celebration of the work that we did, the hard work that Cheryl [Holcomb-McCoy] had put in," Hopson said. "You couldn't see it. You couldn't hear it. And so the task force arose out of faculty and staff getting a pulse on what we wanted."

Wilkins said she and the task force had discussed what it meant for the school to be independent.

"We have gone through what we believe to be the principles of independence, the things that make a school independent and help create an intellectual community, support faculty growth, help with staff, all of that stuff. And those things are not changing," Wilkins said.

Rupp, the undergraduate representative on the task force, said in January that while SOE was in a better place thanks to student advocacy, she found the discussions about shared services highly concerning.

"What administration specifically has been telling us is that the priority is to reduce impact on students," Rupp said. "I don't know whether or not that will be actualized, but that's definitely my priority as well."

Yuri Perelman contributed reporting to this article. Editing by Stella Camerlengo, Caleb Ogilvie and Alexia Partouche.