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Next UT chief lays out lofty goals;

Plans include increasing minority enrollment, securing more money from the Legislature

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William C. Powers Jr., in his first public comments since being named the sole finalist for president of the University of Texas, said Thursday that he would strive to make UT the top public university in the country.

"I do think it is an achievable though very ambitious goal," Powers said. "If you don't shoot for excellence and being the best you can be, you fall behind."

The UT System Board of Regents is expected to declare Powers the next president Dec. 5. Officials said Larry Faulkner, president since 1998, is expected to step down at the end of January, with Powers taking over Feb. 1.

Powers, 59, has been dean of the UT Law School since 2000. He joined the School of Law faculty in 1977.

In a wide-ranging news conference and at a forum attended by about 100 students, faculty and staff members, Powers sketched out an ambitious but measured vision of his future role.

He wants to boost enrollment of African Americans and Hispanics by more vigorous recruiting. He wants to persuade the Legislature to boost spending on higher education generally and on UT in particular. And he wants to strengthen undergraduate education so that freshmen are raving about the experience by the time they go home for Thanksgiving break.

His lofty goal for the university's place in national rankings is reminiscent of Faulkner's wish to see UT mentioned in the same breath as the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Michigan. Most rankings place UT among the top 20 public universities but not in the top 10.

Powers said that a state law guaranteeing admission to any Texas student graduating in the top 10 percent of his or her high school class needs to be revised but that he wasn't sure how.

The law was enacted in 1997 as a tool to promote racial and ethnic diversity after a court ruling resulted in a ban on the use of affirmative action in admissions. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in 2003 that limited use of race in admissions was permissible.

Asked about football, Powers said he didn't plan any changes in the management of the team, which is undefeated this season, and he punted on the question of whether a playoff system should be instituted.

"I'm just going to duck that one," he said.

Powers said the job of president would be demanding, but he expressed confidence that he was qualified by virtue of stamina, administrative experience, ability to work with various constituencies and, perhaps most important, a sense that this is his calling.

"I don't need to be taught to love this state or this university," he said.

Powers, who grew up in Los Angeles and earned degrees at Berkeley and Harvard University, said he knew upon his arrival at UT 28 years ago that he would spend his career here.

"This is the institution that has transformed my life," he said. "I'm not interested in being a president or a dean somewhere else."

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