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# Trustees of NYU and Polytechnic U. Are Expected to Vote on Merger This Week

By [KATHERINE MANGAN](#)

More than three decades after New York University disbanded its engineering school, sending dozens of faculty members to what is now Polytechnic University, trustees of both universities are expected to vote this week on a merger that would reclaim an engineering school for NYU and give the financially strapped technical university the clout of the NYU name.

While some small colleges and vocational schools have turned to mergers, or, at the very least, joint academic programs and financial agreements to create economies of scale, blending entire universities is complicated and hard to pull off ([The Chronicle](#), March 23, 2001).

The two New York suitors discovered that three years ago. Polytechnic faculty members balked at a possible merger because it didn't safeguard their jobs or tenure, or assure them that their campus would remain in downtown Brooklyn. This time, a revised plan that includes those assurances is getting mostly positive reviews.

NYU officials say an engineering school would provide a missing link for their university.

"It's hard to see how NYU can reach its goals in today's technological world without engineering," said NYU Provost David W. McLaughlin.

"Polytechnic has a 150-year history, a strong faculty, laboratories, and infrastructure that are already in place," he said. Trying to build that from scratch "would be a daunting challenge."

Polytechnic boosters say an affiliation with a leading research university would help raise sagging enrollment and ensure the long-term financial stability of the nation's second-oldest private engineering school. It would also offer students access to a broader range of courses.

"Since they don't have an engineering school, we fit in like the missing tooth in the smile," said Polytechnic's president, Jerry M. Hultin, who took office in 2005. As for his university, he said, "A merger would have a powerful impact in recruiting. NYU is a name known around the world."

But not everyone is smiling about the plans for what would probably be known as Polytechnic Institute of NYU, or "New Polytechnic." Polytechnic's alumni association

says the administration is giving away control of its alma mater without a concrete assurance from NYU that it will invest the money needed to upgrade buildings and labs and recruit faculty members.

"We do not believe transferring our assets to NYU with no written guarantees or commitments that NYU will invest the monetary funds required to transform Poly and to account for Poly's value is a fair and equitable deal," the group said in a written statement on its Web site.

Leaders of both universities insist NYU is committed to making those investments, although they have declined to publicly state how much money is on the line. The memorandum of understanding that trustees at each university are expected to vote on this week is not binding, and financial details would be finalized before a binding agreement is signed, they said. Polytechnic alumni, who have hired a lawyer, have urged trustees to hold off on a vote -- an option the president says is possible if trustees think they need more time to consider the matter.

### **NYU Lays Out Advantages**

In a letter to faculty and staff members and students, NYU's president, John E. Sexton, outlined the advantages of a merger. The statement links to a similar one that Polytechnic's administration sent to its faculty members and students.

Faculty members in fields as diverse as medicine, business, media technology, and the arts would benefit from joint research with engineering and technology faculty members, he said in a statement cosigned by the provost, Mr. McLaughlin.

The deal would also give NYU, which has little possibility of expanding its campus in Greenwich Village, a foothold in a prime Brooklyn neighborhood.

"We are convinced that the next generation of NYU stewards will look back at this decision from 15 or 20 years hence and recognize it as among the most important for NYU in the first decade of the 21st century."

NYU faculty members met with the provosts of both universities two week ago in a meeting convened by NYU's Faculty Senators Council.

Sylvain E. Cappell, a professor of mathematics who chairs the council, said professors were excited about the scientific and academic partnerships that could result, especially in cross-disciplinary fields like bioengineering. "At the same time, everyone recognizes that a merger of two institutions, each of which has its own culture and history, isn't easy to accomplish."

The memorandum of understanding that will go before each of the universities' trustees this week calls for a gradual merger over several years. Polytechnic's endowment would shift over to NYU once it became a school of NYU, but since most of the money is

restricted, it would benefit only Polytechnic. Polytechnic's president and top leaders would report to their counterparts at NYU.

### **Polytechnic's Alumni Feel Cautious**

The agreement does not specify when the engineering program could become a school at NYU, although that is the ultimate goal. That uncertainty bothers Polytechnic's alumni association.

"They're saying, "We'll acquire you. Knock yourselves out, and in 10 years, we'll decide whether or not you're worthy of becoming an NYU school," said George Likourezos, a patent lawyer in Long Island who serves as president of Polytechnic Alumni.

NYU's brand name isn't enough to ensure Polytechnic's future success, he said. "Parents are still going to bring their kids to our campus and see that the labs aren't state of the art and the buildings are crumbling."

Mr. Likourezos also worries that a merger with NYU could threaten Polytechnic's historic commitment to educating immigrants and first-generation college students like himself. Many Poly students score relatively poorly on the verbal SAT, and he fears that NYU might be reluctant to drag down its own SAT averages, and consequently its rankings, by accepting such students. (NYU has insisted throughout the negotiations that it is just as committed to providing access to first-generation college students.)

Mr. Likourezos' parents, who worked as a cashier and seamstress, came to the United States from Greece, and he won a full scholarship to attend Poly, where he graduated in 1992. "This university has opened up the American dream to so many students like myself. We can't give it away for nothing."

Last month, the alumni association held a conference call with the university's top leaders to discuss their concerns. Craig G. Matthews, chairman of the university's Board of Trustees, walked a fine line, reassuring the alumni that Polytechnic was on the rebound and would thrive under a merger, while insisting that lingering problems could threaten the university's long-term survival if it tried to go it alone.

Polytechnic's main academic building is a converted 1922 razor-blade factory, and it is surrounded by gleaming high-tech buildings. Just a few years ago, it suffered from a financial and identity crisis that led some to question whether it could survive ([\*The Chronicle\*](#), April 11, 2003).

Although the university has avoided a deficit in the last two years, undergraduate enrollment and retention rates have not increased, and research support has dropped, he said.

"Financially, we are still not strong. In seven out of the last 10 years, we ran a significant financial deficit," Mr. Matthews said. Even though the university has operated without a

deficit the past few years, it will face more financial pressures when bond payments come due in 2011.

"At that point, someone could bargain with us with our backs against the wall," he said. "Right now we have the wind in our sails."

Richard S. Thorsen, vice president of academic affairs and chairman of the Department of Mechanical, Aerospace, and Manufacturing Engineering at Polytechnic, was a 33-year-old associate professor of mechanical engineering at NYU's Bronx campus when the university closed it, and the engineering school, in 1973. He's looking forward to a merger with his old employer.

"I'm true blue Poly. This isn't about going home. It's an alliance that's going to offer huge benefits to both universities."

**Number of students (full-time, all levels)** NYU: 40,000 Polytechnic: 3,317

**Number of faculty members (full-time)** NYU: 3,360 Polytechnic: 143

**Endowment** NYU: \$2-billion Polytechnic: \$137-million

**Year founded** NYU: 1831 Polytechnic: 1854

**Location** NYU: New York, N.Y. (Greenwich Village) Polytechnic: Brooklyn, N.Y.