

Hunter College's Chief Remains a Lightning Rod

By Jack Stripling

There was no honeymoon period for Jennifer J. Raab.

When the politically connected lawyer became president of the City University of New York's Hunter College, in 2001, even her chancellor made clear he had preferred another candidate. A dozen years later, Ms. Raab remains a polarizing figure, whose critics and fan base are both vociferous.

The latest controversy involving the president was sparked in late May, when an assistant dean in the School of Arts & Sciences decided that she'd had about enough of what she described as Ms. Raab's vindictive and mean-spirited style. In a blistering resignation letter, Maria Doelger Anderson said she could not stand by and continue to watch the president "publicly shame and humiliate people to serve her own purpose."

"The path," Ms. Anderson wrote, "that the leadership of the college has chosen to pursue—one that favors select individuals over the goals of the institution and metes out punishment and retribution instead of welcoming an open and honest exchange of ideas—has transformed Hunter into an institution with which I am no longer proud to be associated. Personal attacks and a culture of fear and mistrust have no place in any institution, but are especially appalling at an institution of higher learning such as Hunter."

Ms. Anderson, who worked for nearly three and a half years at Hunter, declined to discuss the letter, other than to say, "They are my words. Nobody asked me to write them."

But there was an apparent ripple effect. Last week Erec R. Koch, dean of Arts & Sciences, announced his resignation as well.

Hunter's president, Jennifer J. Raab: "I've been here 12 years, and I do believe the majority of people, even people who tell me they don't like me, will tell me it's a better place."

Ms. Anderson's letter has set off a new round of discussion at Hunter about Ms. Raab, who had no prior experience running an academic institution before she was [appointed by CUNY's Board of Trustees](#) in a controversial 10-to-6 vote. Ms. Raab came to the job with backing from Rudolph W. Giuliani, then the mayor of New York City, who in 1994 had tapped her to head the city's Landmarks Preservation Commission. She holds a master's degree in public affairs from Princeton University and a law degree from Harvard University, but she has no Ph.D.

To her critics, Ms. Raab is still seen as a steely political hand who never adopted a tolerance, much less a respect, for the tedium of academic governance. But her supporters

describe Ms. Raab as a turnaround artist, whose connections, brainpower, and tirelessness have brought money and esteem to the institution.

Turnover in Key Offices

Ms. Anderson addressed her letter to Mr. Koch, but she then forwarded it to about 50 professors. From there, the letter quickly went viral across the campus. Mr. Koch did nothing to disavow his lieutenant's missive, and on July 2 he wrote an e-mail to colleagues proclaiming, "I will no longer serve as dean."

Mr. Koch said in an interview this week that he and the president had "very divergent views" about the direction of the college, but he declined to provide any particulars. The departing dean and Ms. Raab both say the decision for Mr. Koch to step down was "mutual."

"I was warned that expressing any difference of opinion on matters of significance for the college would result in a withdrawal of her support," Mr. Koch said, "and that is in my view what's happened."

The dean said he was unsure what he would do next.

Mr. Koch's resignation brings more turnover to a position that has already had its fair share. The new acting dean of the School of Arts & Sciences will be the sixth person to hold that job in Ms. Raab's 12 years as president.

Michael Fabricant, a professor of social work, said the turnover of deans was part of a pattern of souring relations between the president and her administration.

"Raab is not without talent," Mr. Fabricant said. "That's not really the point. When you're churning your administrators in this way, you are incinerating continuity and opportunity."

Among some professors and former administrators at Hunter, it is accepted wisdom that all but one of the deans of Arts & Sciences who worked with Ms. Raab had resigned with hard feelings or had felt pressured to leave. The president disputes that, isolating Mr. Koch's case as an anomaly.

"I have a long list of people who have been here a very long time," Ms. Raab said.

"I'm not going to pretend that if somebody isn't doing a good job that I'm going to let them stay," she added.

Ms. Raab insisted that she had not forced out the last permanent dean of Arts & Sciences, Shirley Clay Scott, who served from 2006 to 2009. It is true that Ms. Scott resigned to take care of her son, who had had a stroke. But the former dean said in an interview on Wednesday that she had thought she would eventually be fired because the president's

anger and disappointment was unavoidable and unpredictable. It was the only time in her career, Ms. Scott said, that she had felt so vulnerable to dismissal.

"I don't have a totally negative picture of the president," she said. "I just thought it was an extremely difficult position to be in because you could step into a minefield without even knowing it."

During Ms. Raab's tenure, Hunter's fund-raising offices have also seen notable turnover. In a dozen years, the college has had five acting or permanent executive directors of development, and four other staff members who served in temporary supervisory roles have since left the college. Ms. Raab pointed out, however, that the list includes an executive director who was recruited to another institution after four years, an employee who had to step down due to a serious illness, and a staff member who retired after a long career at Hunter.

Turnover or no, Ms. Raab said no one can argue with her results as a fund raiser. On Wednesday the college announced a \$10-million gift, the largest cash donation in its history.

"Tell me what the problem is," Ms. Raab said, "when Hunter College has never raised more money than this in its life?"

A former dean, who asked not to be identified so he could speak candidly about the president, said he was not surprised that retention of administrators might be a problem. Ms. Raab "tries to bully people," he said. She placed little value on getting buy-in from faculty members for important hires, he said, and deans cannot bring in new professors without broad-based support.

"I would not work with her long-term," the former dean said. "Let's just say that. It was very, very difficult. Every single dean when I was there was very unhappy, and that had been the history, as I understand it, prior to my arrival."

Allies Defend the President

An exception may be David M. Steiner, who is now in his second term as dean of the School of Education. Mr. Steiner left Hunter in 2009 to become commissioner of the New York Education Department, only to return to his old post at the college about two years later.

"I chose to return to the deanship at Hunter not least because President Raab had been brave and bold in supporting a radically new vision for teacher preparation that we were able to develop at the college," Mr. Steiner wrote in an e-mail.

Ms. Raab was not the only one to lose faith in Mr. Koch as dean of Arts & Sciences. Several professors said in interviews and e-mails that they were lukewarm to his

leadership, and the president's closest associates were particularly critical of the departing dean.

"He lacked the vision and leadership that our largest school and most-diverse school needs and deserves at this exciting point in its trajectory," Vita C. Rabinowitz, the college's provost, said in a written statement. "As the administrator who works most closely with him, I found Dean Koch to be a poor fit for the school."

Upon hearing the criticism, Mr. Koch said, "It saddens me that this has become personalized in this way when the issue is really one of a record of attrition in senior administrative ranks. I would certainly be happy to have my record of accomplishment reviewed and assessed by anybody."

It is uncommon for a provost to so overtly and publicly criticize a dean, even after things go south. But Judith Friedlander, a professor of anthropology who works closely with Ms. Raab, said the president's allies had no choice but to fire back, given the dean's apparent complicity in his assistant's harsh letter.

"This is a declaration of war, what's going on here," said Ms. Friedlander, who was acting dean of the School of Arts & Sciences from 2002 to 2006, and stepped down once a permanent dean was named. "You can't lie back in a declaration of war. The president does deserve to have people speak out for her."

Indeed they have. More than a dozen professors e-mailed *The Chronicle* with praise for Ms. Raab, whom they credited with leading the charge on the construction of a new science building, renovating the library, and elevating the college's academic profile. Christa Davis Acampora, chairwoman of the Hunter College Senate, said that Ms. Raab's tenure had been a net positive for the institution.

"There is no doubt about it: She's annoyed people for all kinds of reasons, and I don't dismiss them or take those concerns lightly," said Ms. Acampora, a philosophy professor. "But is Hunter a better place than it was 12 years ago? Absolutely. We used to have to bring our toilet paper with us. It was that bad."

Citing Ms. Raab's accomplishments, college officials said that average SAT scores for students admitted in the fall of 2012 were 1172, up from 1005 in 2001. Hunter's six-year graduation rate of 46 percent for the class that entered in the fall of 2006 marked a 10-percentage-point increase from four years earlier.

Hunter's increased selectivity would appear at least in part attributable to policies put in place before Ms. Raab took office. Until 2000, the college had open admissions.

The Silent Treatment

Ms. Raab's tenure has featured a few stories of shouting matches with faculty members and administrators, but more often, those who say they ran afoul of the president describe her as using the silent treatment as a form of retribution.

Ann H. Cohen, who served as acting provost for nearly a year under Ms. Raab, said her relationship with the president rapidly deteriorated when Ms. Cohen said she did not want to be considered for the permanent provost position.

"She was furious, and what she did to me was pretty typical of what she has done to other people," said Ms. Cohen, a political-science professor at Hunter.

Before long, Ms. Cohen said, the president started calling meetings with the college's deans and would inform her provost only moments before the meetings. Ms. Cohen, to whom the deans reported, interpreted that tactic as an intentional slight designed to isolate her.

"I would be brought into this meeting, and she would proceed to ignore me and make it clear to everyone that I was irrelevant," she said.

Ms. Raab said she was not surprised to hear criticism from Ms. Cohen, whom she described as "not somebody who is going to be head of my fan club."

John J. Brundage, who worked as a fund raiser at Hunter for more than 30 years and retired as a director of development in 2011, said Ms. Raab's meetings were designed from the outset to underscore her power.

"If she wanted you to say something, she would have told you before the meeting started," he said. "And if you started to speak up, she would raise her hand like a stop sign. It became a joke: 'Did you get the hand today?' She would talk right over you. It was demeaning."

Ms. Raab's need to exert her authority, even in the smallest of ways, seemed to know no bounds, Mr. Brundage said. Early in her tenure, she was angered when she attended a holiday concert and did not find her name on the program as a producer, he said. "She pushed me in the chair, and her finger was slamming at the program in the middle of the concert, and she said, 'You get them, and you put my name on this,'" Mr. Brundage recalled. "Her name had to be on everything at the top because she ran the college." The stories of narcissism and mean-spiritedness that follow Ms. Raab do not resonate with everyone, though.

"I have really never seen anything like that ever, not even once," said Peter Carey, executive director of Hunter's M.F.A. program. "That's my experience."

For Ms. Raab, being well liked does not seem the most important thing. She acknowledged some ruffled feathers on the campus but said her presidency was not at a "crisis point" because Hunter was still hiring and retaining good people.

"I've been here 12 years," Ms. Raab said. "And I do believe the majority of people, even people who tell me they don't like me, will tell me it's a better place."