

Northwestern University: Rebecca M. Blank shares cancer diagnosis, choice to step down as president-elect of Northwestern

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President-elect Rebecca M. Blank [announced today, July 11](#), that she has been diagnosed with an aggressive form of cancer and will be unable to fulfill her role as the 17th president of Northwestern University.

She plans to spend the coming weeks and months focusing on her health and family.

“I do not have the words to express to you how disappointed and sad I am to be telling you this. I was excited to be joining you at Northwestern, a world-class institution that is near and dear to my heart,” Blank wrote in a message to the Northwestern community. “As heartbreaking as this is for me, I take solace in knowing Northwestern is in great hands. Although I have not been on campus full-time, I have had the opportunity to talk with many campus leaders over the past eight months. It is clear that NU has tremendous leadership, outstanding faculty and staff, and a wonderful group of students.”

Blank concluded her eight-year tenure as chancellor of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in May. She and her husband will return to the Madison area for her cancer treatment.

Blank was selected in October 2021 to succeed President Morton Schapiro following an extensive search process led by Northwestern’s Board of Trustees.

[In a letter to the NU community](#), J. Landis Martin, Board of Trustees chair, said the Board has asked Schapiro to remain in his role as president until a successor is named. Peter Barris, who led the initial search committee and [will become chair of the Northwestern Board of Trustees](#) Sept. 1, will continue to lead the search for the University's next president. More information regarding the search process will be made available in the coming weeks.

"I want to thank President Schapiro for agreeing to stay on as we search for Northwestern's next president," Martin said. "Morty has led Northwestern through an unprecedented period of growth over the past 13 years, and now has delayed his return to Southern California and new ventures in order to continue to serve the University community that he loves so dearly. We are all grateful."

Blank has strong ties to Northwestern, where she was on the faculty of the Economics Department from 1989 to 1999. She also served as director of the Joint Center for Poverty Research and co-director of the Northwestern/University of Chicago Interdisciplinary Training Program in Poverty, Race and Underclass Issues. Her daughter, Emily, is a Northwestern graduate.

"I ask that all of us at Northwestern keep Becky in our thoughts," Schapiro said. "I will be offering prayers for healing at Shabbat services until her full recovery. She and her family will always be a part of the Northwestern family. May we all stand with her, Hanns and Emily at this incredibly difficult time."

A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences for almost two decades, Blank's distinguished research and policy portfolio was most recently recognized with a lifetime achievement award as a 2021 Distinguished Fellow of the American Economic Association.

She also has served in three presidential administrations, most recently as acting secretary of commerce and deputy secretary of commerce under President Barack Obama.

Blank, who has long been involved with issues of inequality and equity through her research, made improving diversity and access a priority during her tenure at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

"I can speak for all of us in the leadership of the University of Wisconsin-Madison in saying that we're absolutely devastated by the news that Chancellor Emeritus

Becky Blank has been diagnosed with cancer and will not be assuming the presidency of Northwestern University,” said UW-Madison Provost and Interim Chancellor John Karl Scholz in a message to the UW-Madison community.