

Bresch Report Released - 04/24/08
By Emily Corio

Lead: Governor Manchin's daughter, Heather Bresch, will lose her degree, but it's unclear if anyone at WVU will lose their job. A panel investigating whether Bresch earned an MBA degree in 1998 says she did not. The panel also looked at why WVU officials decided to change her transcript last fall—adding 22 credit hours—to indicate that she earned the degree. This came after the Pittsburgh Post Gazette called WVU to verify Bresch's resume after she was named Mylan Pharmaceuticals Chief Operating Officer. The investigative panel concluded WVU officials showed “seriously flawed” judgment in granting Bresch the degree. Emily Corio has more.

Corio: The WVU Board of Governors met behind closed doors for 45 minutes before issuing a directive to WVU President Michael Garrison—this was the board's only public comment on the matter. Here's Board Chairman Stephen Goodwin.

Goodwin: It is the recommendation of the board that you as president of the West Virginia University accept responsibility for errors in judgment and procedures relative to this matter made by members of and personnel affiliated with the Administration. Further, you are to inform Ms. Bresch of the panel's recommendation and the decision that her degree was inappropriately granted.

Corio: Inappropriately granted because the panel says Bresch was given special treatment because of who she is. For one thing, Bresch spoke directly to WVU President Michael Garrison on the same day he received calls from the Pittsburgh Post Gazette last October. Soon after officials scrambled to determine if Bresch really did earn her degree. Admissions and Records didn't have proof. Two administrators in WVU's business school were given a weekend to find any documents to support Bresch's claim. The following Monday, top WVU officials met and decided to retroactively grant Bresch the degree. The meeting included Garrison's Chief of Staff, Craig Walker, General Counsel, Alex Macia, Provost, Gerald Lang, Business School Dean, Stephen Sears, and Bill Case, the university's vice president for communications. According to the report, the decision was based on Bresch's word that then E-MBA program director, Paul Speaker, said she could substitute course work for work experience. But the panel's report says no student should have a reasonable basis to conclude that he or she could or would be excused from so many outstanding credit and course obligations simply by doing their regular job. The panel gave WVU eight recommendations. The first—take appropriate action with respect to awarding Bresch an unearned MBA degree.

Garrison: As president I will take full responsibility for implementing the recommendations of the panel. I will say, however, that there is no substitute in any administrative process for personal responsibility and as the leaders of West Virginia University and as the leader of West Virginia University, we must work everyday to instill this value in our students, but we must practice it everyday and that is what we plan to do.

Corio: Following his statement to the media, Garrison answered a few questions, including this one about cronyism by Associated Press Reporter, Vicki Smith.

Smith: Obviously, you had your critics before your appointment who were worried about political cronyism. What would you say to them now?

Garrison: Well, I think we've said from the beginning, we will take the recommendations of the panel as they come. We're very ready to do that and implement those recommendations, and I think there's some good recommendations. And we're going to work very hard to make sure we have a process in place to meet those recommendations. I just don't want to meet them. I want to exceed them, and we plan to do that.

Corio: WVU Business School Dean, Stephen Sears says the school will rescind Bresch's degree. But when asked if he would make the same decision if he could go back in time, Sears said he probably would.

Sears: Ultimately, whatever decision would be made, either to grant the degree or not to grant the degree, is a judgment call in my opinion.

Corio: That's because Sears says the controversy comes down to the meeting between Bresch and the former director of the E-MBA program back in 1998. But the report said it didn't boil down to just that. The panel said there was pressure from top administrators to side with Bresch and "not to rock the boat." But Provost Gerald Lang says that's not the case.

Lang: Clearly there was no pressure placed on anyone to make any decision. The day we met, and has been referred to as the decisional meeting, we came to a realization that there was incomplete data. We were probably not going to receive any additional data, there was nothing else that we thought was available. We decided at that point that we would make a decision. The dean had made a decision. We spoke with the rest of the individuals who were present from the college, they agreed with the dean's decision. But the dean waited an additional week thereafter, hoping to find some additional information before, so that we could go back if we had to and reexamine that.

Corio: But no other information to support Bresch's claim that she earned the degree has surfaced. In its conclusion, the panel's report calls what happened a "sad set of circumstances." And that "Mistake was compounded by mistake." The report went on to say, "Frankly, they should done just what they said they were doing: they should have treated Ms. Bresch like they would or should have treated any other student who was raising such a complaint."

For West Virginia Public Broadcasting, I'm Emily Corio in Morgantown.