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UCF May Pay Its Former President to Leave. Here's How That Deal Stacks Up Against Others Like It.

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9–11 minutes



Dale Whittaker, then provost, spoke at a UCF event in March 2018. Willie J. Allen Jr., AP Images for Siemens

Dale Whittaker, who [resigned amid controversy](#) last week as president of the University of Central Florida, could collect \$600,000 as part of a proposed severance package.

How typical is such a payout for someone who held the job for just

eight months? And how does the amount stack up against [other notable settlements](#) for leaders in public higher education?

The circumstances of Whittaker's resignation might raise questions about the merits of a payout that is more than four times as large as the average salary of a professor at the institution he led only briefly. Last year a state auditor found that UCF had misused \$38 million in state funds for construction of a new building. Since that audit, Whittaker and other UCF administrators have faced tough questions from lawmakers. Whittaker said he had resigned so that the relationship between the institution and the legislature "can be renewed."

A report on the matter is expected to be released soon by the Florida House of Representatives' Public Integrity & Ethics Committee, said Robert A. Garvy, chairman of the university's board.

Garvy also told *The Chronicle* in a [written statement](#) that the board had postponed a planned meeting, initially set for Thursday, so that it could review the House committee's report, as well as new depositions taken during a continuing investigation into UCF's use of state funds for construction.

The proposed settlement arrangement was "unusual," said James

H. Finkelstein, a professor emeritus of public policy at George Mason University, who has studied the compensation of university presidents for more than two decades. Finkelstein reviewed the proposal before speaking with *The Chronicle*.

“Based on our experience, we have not seen this kind of severance package for a voluntary resignation of a president who served for less than a year,” said Finkelstein. “Usually, when you resign, you are not entitled to any severance,” he said.

The proposed settlement, which carries Wednesday’s date, calls for Whittaker to be paid a lump sum of \$435,000 to relinquish his tenure at UCF, supplemented with \$165,000 in severance pay, which is equal to 20 weeks of his faculty salary. The average salary for a UCF professor was \$136,000 in 2016, [according to data reported by UCF](#) to the U.S. Department of Education.

The terms of the proposed agreement also call for UCF to pay Whittaker’s legal costs for claims made against him as they relate to his presidency. At least four administrators are facing termination for their involvement in the misuse of funds at UCF, [according to the *Orlando Sentinel*](#).

As a result of the proposed deal, Whittaker and UCF would release each other from the threat of legal liability arising from Whittaker’s resignation.

How It Compares

The potential UCF-Whittaker deal bears a similarity to the severance package agreed to by Kenneth W. Starr and Baylor University. Both universities had to buy their leaders out of tenured contracts.

In 2016, Baylor [paid](#) Starr more than \$4.5 million in severance, some of which the university accounted for by having to buy out Starr's tenured professorship following his resignation as chancellor of Baylor. The university had already demoted him from president to that more ceremonial role after a report concluded that Baylor had bungled its investigation of and response to a series of alleged sexual assaults by football players.

Should the trustees approve the deal with Whittaker, it would be the ninth-largest severance or settlement payment made to a chief executive of a public university or university system since the 2011 fiscal year, according to a *Chronicle* analysis of data collected on presidential compensation in higher education.

Topping that list is the former president of Ohio State University, E. Gordon Gee, now chief executive of West Virginia University. Ohio State paid Gee a severance package of \$1.5 million in the 2013 fiscal year. Other large settlements include one valued at \$1.2 million, paid to Graham B. Spanier by Pennsylvania State University in the 2012 fiscal year; and Michael R. Gottfredson, who took home \$940,000 from a settlement package from the University of Oregon in 2015.

Among the leaders of private universities, recent top payouts went, in addition to that for Starr, to Simon P. Newman, former president of Mount St. Mary's University. Newman received a \$383,000 severance package in 2016 after drawing criticism for a proposal to cull the freshman class of struggling students as a means of raising the university's place in national rankings.

And at Suffolk University, [Margaret McKenna was dismissed](#) in 2016 after one year on the job. She agreed to a \$267,500

severance payment in 2016. Her departure followed a public feud with the university's board.

Here is a list of the severance packages paid out to the leaders of public institutions of higher education since 2011:

Correction (3/5/2019, 4:35 p.m.): The table with this article originally included James B. Milliken, of the University of Nebraska system. The system incorrectly reported that he had received severance in the 2014 fiscal year, when he was instead compensated for unused vacation time, as well as holiday pay. The table has been updated to remove Milliken.