

Venezuelan born Academic elected MIT President

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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology on Wednesday named Rafael Reif, an electrical engineer born in Venezuela who has been the university's provost since 2005, as its 17th president.

Reif, 61, replaces Susan Hockfield, the first female president of MIT, who announced in mid-February that she was stepping down after almost eight years leading one of the most prestigious universities in the United States.

Reif will take up his post at the Cambridge, Massachusetts, university on July 2, the first MIT president not to be a native English speaker.

In his role as provost, the senior academic official at the university, Reif helped create and implement a strategy that allowed MIT to weather the global financial crisis, despite a large decline in its endowment, and drove the growth of the university overseas, from Abu Dhabi to Russia.

He also led the development of MITx, the university's initiative in online learning, and pushed an effort to increase diversity among the university's faculty.

He takes over at a time when many college graduates face crippling student debt and an uncertain job market, and when MIT is preparing to launch a major fundraising campaign and expand its online learning programs.

Reif is the youngest of four sons of émigrés who fled Eastern Europe for Latin America in the late 1930s, living first in Ecuador and Colombia before settling in Venezuela. Reif's father worked as a photographer.

"I grew up in a home wealthy in integrity and principles and values, but poor in everything material," Reif said at a news conference to announce the appointment.

Reif earned an undergraduate degree in engineering from Venezuela's Universidad de Carabobo in 1973. He gained a master's and PhD in electrical engineering from Stanford University in California and joined MIT in 1980.

He was an early champion of the university's work in micro- and nanotechnology. He holds 15 patents, has won several teaching awards and has supervised 38 doctoral theses.