

GOSHEN COLLEGE BOARD OF DIRECTORS DECISION STATEMENT

ACTION: On June 4, 2011, the Board approved the following resolution:

“Resolved that the Board is committed to advancing with President Brenneman the vision for Goshen College to be recognized as an influential leader in liberal arts education with a growing capacity to serve a theologically, politically, racially and ethnically diverse constituency both within and beyond the Mennonite church.

“As a result of a thoughtful, thorough, prayerful period of listening, learning and discerning, it is the Board’s judgment that continuing to play the national anthem compromises our ability to advance the vision together. As a result, the President should find an alternative to playing the National Anthem that fits with sports tradition, that honors country, that resonates with our core values and that respects the views of diverse constituencies.”

Background:

On Feb. 13, 2010, the Board affirmed the decision of the President’s Council to allow a music-only version of the National Anthem to be played at select athletic events at Goshen College. Recognizing the deeply held and divergent opinions around this decision, the Board also asked the College’s leadership to create opportunities for thoughtful and prayerful discernment in ongoing structured dialogue, especially with those beyond the immediate college community (alumni and others). Further, the Board decided that the President’s Council’s decision would be reviewed in June 2011. Since making those decisions, the Board has carefully considered this issue and the feedback of thousands of alumni, students, faculty, staff and friends who offered opinions, advice and prayers over the past 16 months, and especially during a formal “Listen & Learn” process. Over many hours, the Board worked on and prayed for guidance about this issue. At its meeting on June 3-4, 2011, the Board further discussed and deliberated this issue before reaching its final decision.

In making this decision, the Board:

- Acknowledges its responsibility to resolve this important issue so Goshen College, the Board and the President’s Council can move forward and address other significant matters facing the College.
- Believes that sincerely held and valid faith perspectives and theological viewpoints were expressed on all sides of this issue. Ultimately, the Board sought to find a path of wisdom.
- Acknowledges Goshen College is part of Mennonite Church USA — a ministry of the Church “which seeks to integrate Christian values with educational, social and professional life.”
- Affirms the College’s Vision Statement, its Mission and its Core Values.
- Affirms the leadership of President Brenneman, the President’s Council and their strategic plan.
- Appreciates the helpful and sincere feedback from thousands of constituents since January 2010. The Board truly heard, understood and considered the views of those on all sides of this issue.
- Appreciates the thoroughness of the Listen & Learn process, which provided opportunities for alumni, students, faculty, staff, friends and other constituents to provide feedback through an e-survey, group and individual conversations and through phone calls, letters and emails.
- Is grateful for the significant contributions by the Listen & Learn Steering Committee, which was made up of students, faculty, alumni and Board members, and the excellent facilitation by Dr. Larissa Fast of the University of Notre Dame, and Dr. Bernie Mayer of Creighton University.
- Believes the Listen & Learn process demonstrated the Goshen College community could discuss difficult issues with civility and mutual respect.
- Is mindful of the Mennonite Church USA guidelines about conflict expressed in “Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love” and recognizes that some individuals will not support the Board’s decision.
- Is grateful for the enduring love and support constituents have for Goshen College.
- Acknowledges the need to move forward together, united with courage, hope and grace.

In deciding this issue, the Board considered the following criteria:

- The long-term vision, mission, and sustainability of Goshen College
- The College's five core values
- Student learning and experience
- Student enrollment and retention
- Relationships with and perspectives of the college's key stakeholders and constituents, including alumni, students, faculty and staff, Mennonite Church USA, local community, donors, and the Board's relationship with the President and President's Council
- The College's institutional identity
- The Goshen College Ends Statement and Board policies

The Board offers the following reflections in hopes of fostering reconciliation and healing.

About the decision-making process and its aftermath:

- The process that preceded the President's Council's decision to allow the National Anthem to be played included opportunities for students, faculty and staff members to offer feedback. It would have been helpful had there been opportunities for greater alumni participation.
- The Board should have engaged more deeply on the anthem proposal when given the opportunity by President Brenneman in December 2009.
- Despite efforts to the contrary, the decision announcement by the President's Council polarized College constituents, prompting disagreement about the process, the outcome, or both.
- Subsequently, a framework emerged that felt to those opposed to playing the anthem that they were perceived as not welcoming/hospitable to non-Mennonites. In fact, many welcome non-Mennonites to the College and believe that playing the anthem has nothing to do with hospitality.
- Another framework emerged that felt to those who favored playing the anthem that they were perceived as motivated solely by concerns over finances and enrollment. In fact, many believe playing the anthem was a gesture of welcome that appropriately honored and showed respect for the country.

What the Listen & Learn process revealed:

- All sides gave pragmatic, values-based and theological reasons for their positions.
- Among those who support playing of the anthem, their reasons included a belief that playing the anthem does not displace higher allegiances, including an understanding of Jesus, the ultimate peacemaker, loving all people of the world. Playing the anthem also honors our country and improves community relations by welcoming and respecting the views of non-Mennonite students.
- Among those who do not support the playing of the anthem, their reasons included that the College was sacrificing its peace focus and unique Mennonite identity and that allegiance should be to Christ rather than to country (and to all people rather than one nation/country). They also objected to the lyrics or said it was important to follow the College's history and tradition and it was important to retain a position of non-conformity to the dominant culture or media influence.
- There were significant divisions in the way Mennonites and non-Mennonites who responded to the e-survey viewed the issue. While a majority of Mennonites who responded to the e-survey viewed playing the anthem as having a negative impact on the College's core values, a majority of non-Mennonite students and faculty responding to the e-survey viewed the anthem as having a positive impact on the core values. Still, the issue could not be reduced to a clash between those two groups and there was overlap on many of their viewpoints.
- Constituents on all sides were "hurt, disillusioned, and exhausted," in part because of the reactions to their views and in part because they believed too much or too little time was spent on this issue.
- Virtually all agreed that Goshen College faces an inclusivity challenge, with continuing tension around Mennonite culture and ethnicity and a subsequent impact on hospitality.

The positive role of the President's Council:

- The Board believes the President's Council has done a very good job facilitating spirited conversations and have modeled "Agreeing and Disagreeing in Love" with alumni and the campus community when discussing the National Anthem and other complex issues.
- The Board believes the College's vision, mission and core values are intact and the President's Council is dedicated to the College's traditional Anabaptist faith understandings and its emphasis on peace. The decision to play the anthem has been cited by some students, faculty, staff, alumni and other constituents as evidence of a "slippery slope" away from being a Mennonite church ministry devoted to global citizenship and compassionate peacemaking and a departure from the College's peace tradition. The Board does not share those concerns.
- Further, under President Brenneman's leadership, the College has engaged in meaningful conversations on what it means for Goshen College to be a Mennonite institution with a strong peace tradition. The College has clarified understandings in this regard in significant ways, including the establishment of the Core Values Institute, by being clearer about the centrality of peacemaking at Goshen College in recruitment efforts (and through the extensive "Peace by Peace" branding initiative) and through changes to the General Education curriculum.
- The Board supports President Brenneman's efforts to welcome diverse students who support the College's core values. The Board also supports the President's commitment to create a campus culture that is even more diverse and that welcomes diverse viewpoints.

Evidence of unity moving forward:

- The Listen & Learn process revealed strong points of agreement by those on all sides of the anthem issue. There is significant loyalty to Goshen College and all constituents want Goshen College to be a place that makes people feel welcome. Constituents also view the College's Christ-centered core values and academics as Goshen's most important priorities.
- The Board also anticipate alumni, students, faculty, staff, friends and other constituents will continue to support the growth of Goshen College.

Next steps:

President Brenneman will implement this decision.

Concluding remarks:

The Board wishes to acknowledge and thank President Brenneman for his leadership in focusing important discussions on the identity and mission of Goshen College, his commitment to diversity and inclusiveness in the Goshen College community, the way he has modeled a capacity to respectfully hear other views on the anthem and other issues and the way he helped the Board in its path to this decision.

Discussion on the issues surrounding and raised by the playing of the National Anthem at Goshen College — including questions of faith, denominational affiliation, institutional identity, core values and hospitality — will and should continue. The official discussion, though, at Goshen College about this issue is concluded with the Board's decision. With courage, grace and hope, Goshen College will have a long and bright future of furthering God's kingdom.

— *Approved by the Goshen College Board of Directors, June 6, 2011*