

**Final Report to Goshen College Board of Directors
On the “Listen and Learn Process”
Prepared by the Listen and Learn Steering Committee¹
May 2011**

Executive Summary

The Listen and Learn Steering Committee (SC), convened to analyze the data on playing the anthem at select sporting events at Goshen College, has prepared this report for the Goshen Board of Directors. The report summarizes the key themes we have heard over the last eight months. The Listen and Learn Process has involved three types of events and information: a stakeholder survey sent to alumni, faculty, staff, and current students; a series of campus conversations, organized by the SC; and a series of regional alumni gatherings, organized by the Goshen Office of Advancement and the President’s office that included an opportunity for alumni to provide feedback on the decision. These events are outlined in the table below:

Stakeholder Survey	Campus Conversations	Alumni Gatherings
Non-Faculty and Staff Alumni (3,428 e-respondents, 38% + 199 paper respondents)	February 17 – Teaching Faculty Event	October 9 – Hesston, KS
Faculty and Staff (including alums – 117 respondents, 68%)	March 2 – Administrative Faculty and Staff Event	January 30 – Washington, DC
Students (407 respondents, 41%)	March 9 – Student Event	January 31 – Lancaster, PA
	April 13 – All Campus Event	February 24 – Middlebury, IN
		February 26 – Normal, IL
		March 6 – Coralville, IA
		March 31 – Walnut Creek, OH
		April 11 – Indianapolis, IN
		April 14 – Goshen, IN

Summary of Overall Process

In this report to the Board, the members of the SC are describing and processing what we have heard from alumni, faculty, staff, students, and friends and supporters of the College. Many of the themes included here surfaced in multiple sources and events.

This Executive Summary covers points of agreement and tension, reflecting all data and sources of feedback, with a section on “learnings” and observations from the Listen and Learn process as a whole.

¹ The members of the committee are: Kathy Meyer Reimer, teaching faculty; Joe Liechty, teaching faculty; Robert Reyes, administrative faculty; John F. Lapp, alumnus; Krysten Parson, alumna and Maple Leaf Athletic Club board member; David Jost, student; Justin Yoder, student; Rose Gillin, GC board member; Ivorie Lowe, GC board member; Karen Thomson, GC board member; Bill Born, President Council's staff member designee; Larissa Fast, facilitator; and Bernie Mayer, facilitator. The committee thanks Scott Barge for his work in helping prepare and interpret the survey data.

The summary first describes the overall process and the events that comprise the Listen and Learn (L&L) process before turning to the points of agreement, points of tension, and learnings.

E-Survey

The survey contained general questions about alumni and their current activities, experience at Goshen College, and their perspectives about the anthem in relation to the College's vision statement. In total, 3,428 alumni (38% e-response rate plus an additional 199 responses to mailed invitations), 117 faculty and staff (68%), and 407 students (41%) completed the survey.

Campus Conversations

The SC organized four campus conversation events: an event primarily for teaching faculty, one primarily for administrative faculty and staff, a convocation for students, and an all-campus event. This format allowed us to accommodate those who may have been more comfortable sharing perspectives among their organizational peers at the College, even though we encouraged people to come to whichever event suited them best. The fourth event was an open, all-campus event to report back on some of the initial themes from the campus events and as a way of talking about the issue across groups.

Larissa Fast and Bernie Mayer facilitated the first three meetings, with a similar format for all three. SC members sat at tables, listened to conversations, and took notes. Participants sat at tables and were asked to discuss the following questions:

- What is the meaning of the anthem issue to you? What do you think is the most essential thing to take into consideration when deciding how to handle it?
- Given agreement on the desire to have an open and welcoming campus and disagreement around the role the anthem plays in this, what principles should Goshen follow to honor its foundational values and to provide an open and welcoming campus for students from other faith traditions?

The final campus event brought together people from across campus – students, staff, and faculty. Conversations took place in table groups and focused on affirmations and tensions related to the three themes of hospitality, core values, and Goshen's institutional identity.

Regional Alumni Gatherings

A total of nine alumni gatherings took place between October 2010 and mid-April 2011. After presentations by President Jim Brenneman and Vice President for Institutional Advancement Jim Caskey, alumni were given the opportunity to provide feedback about the decision to play the anthem. Vice President for Student Life and Dean of Students Bill Born facilitated most of these sessions. At least one GC Board member attended each of the gatherings and provided a report of the meeting.

Significant Points of Agreement that Emerge from the Listen and Learn Process

While the anthem has generated controversy, the implications of the decision have also surfaced points of agreement.

- Everyone wants Goshen College to be a place that makes people feel welcome.
- Alumni, faculty/staff, and students all express significant loyalty to GC.
- Based on the survey data, the GC core values are clearly the most important priorities for alumni (both Mennonite and "Other Than Mennonite"), followed by leadership in academics. Survey

- respondents affirmed the overall importance of academics as a top priority of the institution.
- As a whole, student, faculty/staff, and alumni survey respondents collectively affirm that “Building on our Christ-centered core values” should be a top priority.

There are parts of the “Other Than Mennonite” (OTM) constituency that believe playing the anthem has a mostly negative effect, just as there are parts of the Mennonite constituency that believe the decision has a mostly positive impact. The survey results suggest that the strongest differences in opinion surface when broken out by Mennonite and OTM categories, and are minimal when broken out by other categories, such as alumni era or donor status. Nevertheless, the categories of Mennonite/OTM are not monolithic, and the qualitative data, campus conversations, and alumni gatherings attest to diversity of opinion within these groups. Thus, while significant divisions emerge based on Mennonite/OTM categories, the issue cannot be simply reduced to a clash between Mennonites and OTM stakeholders of the College.

Significant Points of Tension that Emerge from the Listen and Learn Process

Overall the Listen and Learn process uncovered a number of areas of tension related to the anthem decision, reflecting a diversity of opinion and a degree of polarization among and between the GC stakeholder groups (alumni, faculty and staff, students). We summarize these areas of tension as related to the following: the framing of the anthem issue in terms of welcome and hospitality; how the decision affects GC core values; GC’s identity as an institution and how and where enrollment is related to this issue; the motivations for and against playing the anthem.

Tension around the framing of the anthem issue in terms of welcome and hospitality

- A significant number of people feel a dichotomy has been set up that equates not playing the anthem with not being welcoming/hospitable, or alternatively, that playing the anthem at sporting events is being welcoming/hospitable). Many do not agree with this dichotomy and believe GC’s ability to welcome or be hospitable has little to do with whether GC plays the anthem.
- The framing of hospitality gives rise to the question of whether framing the anthem in terms of welcome and diversity pits welcome against heritage. How can we express welcome in a way that emphasizes the peace identity as most important?
- Perspectives about the anthem are often framed in terms of normative and pragmatic concerns, expressed by both sides. Those who support playing the anthem often frame the decision in pragmatic terms (related to finances or enrollment) and those who oppose playing the anthem often frame the decision in normative or value-based terms (related to the peace focus, Mennonite identity). Equally, those who support the decision also speak of values (related to supporting our country/troops, showing respect for the country in which we live) and those who oppose the decision are also concerned about the pragmatic ramifications of the decision (related to finances and enrollment). Concerns around the “welcome/hospitality” frame fit equally in both: the welcome/hospitality framing is both pragmatic (hospitality/a welcoming environment attracts and keeps students, positively affecting enrollment) and normative (hospitality/welcome as a Christian value).
- A common and recurrent topic from the final campus conversation table groups related to the desire to do a better job of clearly communicating the reasons and theological justification for practices on campus (such as not playing the anthem) and what it means, in an historical and contemporary context, what it means to be a Mennonite. This communication needs to happen

in multiple spaces and time periods on campus – from admissions and orientation to course work and athletic events.

Tension around how the decision affects GC core values

- In the survey results, faculty/staff and students tended to show more mixed responses than alumni, who tended to see the decision in a negative light, particularly with regards to the GC core values and its relationship with the Mennonite church.
- The effect on the GC core values is one area where a split appears between Mennonite and OTM constituencies. An overwhelming majority of Mennonites who believe playing the anthem has a moderate or significant impact on our core values also believe that impact is mostly negative. For some of this population, playing the national anthem is fundamentally at odds with their interpretation of the core values and represents a disturbing shift away from the Mennonite identity of the institution. Of OTM faculty and staff and students who believe playing the anthem has a moderate or significant impact on our core values, more respondents think this impact is mostly positive rather than mostly negative. On the other hand, there is also a portion of the overall constituency that sees playing the anthem as having little to no impact on our core values, or has no opinion about the nature of the impact.
- Some expressed a concern about the amount of time and attention focused on this issue, and a sense that the College and the church face much bigger issues than this.

Tension around how the anthem decision relates to GC's identity as a college and its relationship to how and where to grow student enrollment

- The identity of GC is important to many. Nevertheless, the interpretation of what is significant in creating GC's identity or what GC has to offer the world differs among and within alumni, faculty/staff, and students, in ways related to the pragmatic and normative framing identified above.
- Is the playing of the anthem a theological or cultural issue? What is the relationship between these two, and where does GC fit? This gives rise to questions about the role of symbols and symbolism (e.g., whether regularly singing a ritual song indeed affects how you think) and the relationship between nationalism/patriotism and playing the anthem.
- As virtually all acknowledge, GC faces an inclusivity challenge. Tension exists around Mennonite "culture/ethnicity", which often serves as a marker of insider or outsider status, and the more inclusive "Anabaptist theology/values", with which OTM can easily identify and agree. This links to the tension around welcome and hospitality.
- The identities of "Mennonite" and "OTM" (or "non-Mennonite") sit uncomfortably with many, regardless of their opinion about the anthem. An additional issue is how to challenge and move beyond these identities and at the same time to recognize that they do have meaning.
- A related but different point concerns the role of athletics at the institution and as part of the institutional culture. Some see playing the anthem as a sports-driven issue and question the role of athletics at GC. This issue is accentuated because of the linkage between the anthem and sporting events at GC and at sporting events more generally and the perceived linkage between athletics and enrollment at GC.

Tension around the motivations for and against playing the anthem

- Among those who support the playing of the anthem, their reasons include the following: demonstrating respect for our country; attracting, welcoming, and showing respect for OTM students; increasing enrollment; improving community relations.

- Among those who do not support the playing of the anthem, their reasons include the following: GC is sacrificing its peace focus and unique Mennonite identity; allegiance should be to Christ rather than to country, to all people rather than one nation/country; the importance of history and tradition; the importance of non-conformity to the dominant culture or media influence.

Observations and “Learnings” from the Listen and Learn Process

On the “anthem” and the “anthem issue”

- As we listened to feedback from the campus conversations and alumni gatherings, it became apparent that there are really two separate pieces related to the decision to play the anthem. One concerns people’s opinions and perspectives about the anthem itself (content), and the other is about process. The decision to play the anthem is one division, but another equally important division is about the process related to dealing with the decision. To some extent, the anthem issue revealed divisions that existed prior to the decision in February 2010.
- For some, the way that people are or are not included in decision-making or have the opportunity to provide input into decisions that affect the life and character of the institution is of central concern. For this population, transparency is crucial. For others, the key issue is the whether or not the College plays the anthem. Thus, the ramifications will linger beyond the Board’s decision in June, whatever it may be.
- Statements and laments about the divisiveness of the issue on campus, which clearly surfaced in the campus conversations, suggest the need for balance between letting the issue go and the need for continued engagement, if not specifically on the anthem and Board decision, then on common concerns and moving forward.
- People acutely feel the divisiveness and even polarization this issue has revealed and caused on campus and are concerned about how to live and work together after the Board makes and announces its decision. It is virtually inevitable that some elements of the GC constituency will be unhappy, whatever the final decision about the anthem. As a result, the need for healing, especially on campus, will remain a core issue in the near future.

On GC’s institutional identity

- The Listen and Learn process surfaced agreement about and affirmation of the core values among a wide variety of stakeholder groups. There is less of a sense of how these values are related to Anabaptist values. In this way, restating the obvious can offer reassurance. Many of those who oppose the decision expressed a desire to explicitly reaffirm how the core values are grounded in Anabaptist theology.
- One way this issue came out was in terms of distinctiveness. What makes GC unique or distinctive? How are we distinct from other Christian liberal arts colleges? For some, the anthem provided a clear marker of how GC is different/unique, and now this has disappeared. For others, the relationship between the anthem and GC’s uniqueness is less evident. Not playing the anthem is, however, an identity marker for a people who have jettisoned identity markers for many decades.
- Comments from the alumni meetings about the relationship between Mennonite Church USA and the college need to be highlighted. How can the administration and Board assure the most loyal group of GC supporters that the College is not stepping on a slippery slope away from being a prime locus of Mennonite Church ministry? Is Goshen College’s core raison d’être to be a “Mennonite College” or a “Christian College” or a “Community College”? If it chooses to be unique and Mennonite, and assuming it no longer can focus on simply teaching young Mennonites to be church leaders, what is the alternative ministry?

- Relatedly, some stakeholders feel like the College is changing from what it has been or what they understood it to be. While this is not necessarily a bad thing, it is important to ensure that these stakeholders understand what the college is representing, and thus what remains stable and consistent in a time of change. We heard variants on this theme, along the lines of, “is this indicating that the College is moving away from its roots?”.

On alternatives...

Many people offered their opinions about alternatives to playing the anthem. These are a few of the alternatives that we heard over the past eight months:

- Play something else – specifically, “America, the Beautiful” or “This Land is Our Land”.
- Play the national anthem alongside another anthem – of an international Goshen student; of a country to which GC has connections, like a SST country; or a country of a student from the opposing team. (Many noted this would require additional administrative work to identify and explain the choice and would lengthen the time to complete the ritual prior to the start of a game.)
- Some alumni don’t like playing the anthem alongside the Prayer of St. Francis because it elevates the anthem to civil religion. On the other hand, some like it because it signifies the College’s Christian values and identity.
- Write new lyrics for the anthem, or rewrite and play the rewritten anthem (music and lyrics).

Steering Committee reflections on moving forward

The Steering Committee believes that what the Board decides about the anthem is important. We also believe that how the College positions itself in light of the decision, whatever that may be, is equally important. On campus in particular, this decision and subsequent process has left people hurt, disillusioned, and exhausted, in part because of the inherent value judgment related to the degree of importance placed on the issue and their perspective (e.g., this is a little issue and it has been magnified; this is central and isn’t being taken seriously). To move forward in the best possible manner requires honoring the principles and beliefs on all sides that have driven the concerns thus far, and to demonstrate how the College will take these into account. Here are some things that seem to us to be critical in framing the way forward:

- In the campus conversations in particular, we heard a strong desire and need to promote dialogue and conversation across differences on campus, on multiple issues and in multiple spaces (not just in the classroom). This goes beyond the anthem/anthem issue and relates to other potentially divisive topics. The General Education curriculum revision is one productive and useful way of promoting conversation and dialogue in the classroom. This need, however, extends beyond interactions among students and faculty in the classroom.
- In this way, the discussions and controversy around the anthem present an opportunity to clarify areas of growth and what is and should be central to the College. What does it mean to be a Mennonite institution? How does being a Mennonite institution relate to embracing the core values and being welcoming and inclusive of a more diverse student population? There is a large literature on what it means to be a Mennonite institution but little about how to be a Mennonite institution that includes the “other.” There is a desire to discuss these issues.
- This is a time of change for the College. In times of change, we believe it is important to also articulate what will stay the same: what the College remains deeply committed to and that will undergird the changes that are happening, in order to offer reassurance that the changes will not fundamentally alter the character and values of the institution.
- The lack of understanding on both sides of the issue – in particular related to why not playing the anthem is important to many Mennonites, and on the flip side, the reasons for playing the

anthem (e.g., welcome, enrollment) – suggests the need to ensure that people (faculty, staff, students) learn more about GC’s history and values, as a way of articulating and educating people about GC’s distinctiveness. This relates to the need to clearly communicate the rationale for practices related to the anthem (a kind of “truth in advertising”) and what it means to be Mennonite in an historic and contemporary sense. The campus conversations highlighted many of the deeply held beliefs and rationales among those who both support and oppose the decision.

- Given the support for the College, whatever decision the Board makes, it will be important to clearly articulate and widely circulate the rationale for the decision, and to clarify what the decision means, or doesn’t mean, for the College. Relatedly, it will be important to move into the future with confidence about all GC has to offer.
- Many have expressed interest in the survey results and what the Listen and Learn process has surfaced – what the SC and Board have “heard” and “learned” as a result of this process – and the need for transparency in both decision-making and information related to the Listen and Learn process and eventual decision, and in future to decisions of similar magnitude or content.
- Thinking about possible symbols and practices that promote unity and demonstrate diversity could offer a way of moving forward that both affirms history and welcomes diversity.