

November 8, 2019

Via Email

Thomas Kunkel,
President Emeritus, St. Norbert College

Re: Reply to your November 4, 2019 Letter

Dear Tom,

On Monday, November 4, a letter from you was publicly sent to the Board of Trustees and others regarding president Bruess's announcement that he is not seeking to extend his employment contract at the College. Your letter was subsequently published by the St. Norbert Times student newspaper and has since been picked up by various social and other media sites.

Prior to sending your letter, you did not contact any member of the Executive Committee of the Board of Trustees, who, as you know, are charged with various governing responsibilities, including overseeing the president's contract and renewal. You have not identified the source of the information you used to criticize our process.

The Executive Committee and other Trustees have always taken your previous suggestions to heart in guiding our actions. Integrity, compassion, transparency, and fairness are doctrines that have always guided our actions as a Committee, as well as our actions as a full Board. Those doctrines have been applied in all of our conversations with president Bruess regarding his renewal.

Since you elected not to contact us for a direct, first-hand description of the processes that have occurred, we wanted to clear up a number of the misperceptions reflected in your letter.

First, you may not be aware that president Bruess and the Board agreed, in connection with Brian's announcement of his departure, not to provide details regarding his decision, other than to indicate Brian's decision was due to differences over vision for the College. That statement was proposed by president Bruess as a general characterization of our discussions. President Bruess rightfully felt that the issues relating to his decision were private personnel matters and should be honored as such. The Executive Committee and the Board have steadfastly attempted to comply with his request – often times to the detriment of the Trustees, who are now being publicly criticized, by you and others, for not sharing details about President Bruess's decision.

Second, you state in your letter that you have stayed out of College affairs since 2017 and that it is not your place to tell the Trustees how to perform their responsibilities. We can confirm that the Executive Committee has had continuous oversight over president Bruess's services, much as we did yours, particularly early in your tenure. Trustees who do not serve on the Executive Committee delegate that oversight responsibility to the Executive Committee. Therefore, it is not unusual that those Trustees who are not on the Executive Committee do not have the same

depth of knowledge about matters assigned to the Executive Committee as those who sit on the Executive Committee.

You have claimed that some of the Trustees were “surprised” to learn about the outcome of the contract extension discussions with president Bruess, however, that is not necessarily unusual given the delegation of authority to the Executive Committee. The full Board has historically placed great weight on the first hand observations and conclusions of the Executive Committee when it comes to subjects that have been delegated to the Executive Committee.

You have characterized the process leading to president Bruess’s announcement as marked by “confusion”, misinformation, disinformation, bad faith, and an “egregious” conflict of interest. You did not recite any examples or facts that gave rise to these criticisms, nor do you cite the source of these inflammatory allegations. Those of us who have served on the Executive Committee dispute these undeserved characterizations.

The process of discussions with president Bruess proceeded in a very diligent, not “confused” manner. Direct conversations regarding contract extension started this summer, at president Bruess’s request, and extended into the fall. Members of the Executive Committee discussed the topic on many occasions, and our full Committee sought internal consensus before the Board was advised of the status of the discussions. As the discussions reached maturity, meetings of the full Board of Trustees were called, and the other Trustees were brought up to speed on the negotiations. During the Board meetings, information was supplied from representatives of the Executive Committee as well as other sources. At no time was “misinformation”, “disinformation” or “bad faith” involved in the Committee’s report or the Board discussions.

You also suggested that our procedures were marred by a “conspicuous” personal conflict of interest. This criticism is entirely unfounded. Many of our Trustees have business relationships with the College, others are members of our sponsor (the Norbertines), and many have personal friendships with members of the College community. Many of us counted you among our closest friends while we were overseeing your performance. At no time was any relationship improper, nor did any relationship unduly impact the Board’s procedures. (We also note that there has been vicious gossip circulating in relation to some of our members. We hope that your allegation was not based on such unfortunate personal attacks.)

President Bruess not only had various meetings and other communications with members of the Executive Committee, he has freely spoken with many of our Trustees, and he was provided an opportunity to address the entire Board to discuss his views. This was afforded to president Bruess even though it had not been afforded on previous occasions when a president’s contract was not renewed. In previous situations, discussions with the president regarding non-renewal occurred at the Executive Committee level, and the approval by the full Board occurred without any opportunity for the president to address the full Board.

The Board conducted several meetings in relation to president Bruess’s decision not to seek a renewal of his contract. The Board ultimately accepted that decision. Although every Trustee has their own personal viewpoint, every Trustee who attended was provided every opportunity to provide their views, and the Board considered letters and information from various

constituencies. Our Executive Committee certainly spoke with many members of those same constituencies during the entire process.

You criticized the Board for accepting the decision by written ballot (which you refer to as “secret”). As you may or may not recall, our Board rules mandate that a secret ballot must be used upon request of any single Trustee, the Board has no ability to deny such a request. As I am sure you are aware, written or “secret” ballots are commonly used to avoid undue influence or pressure on the voter (one of the reasons elections in the United States are conducted by the same process).

In summary, while you are among many who feel that more information should be shared with the community, at its heart this involves a personal decision by president Bruess, who agreed that he and the College should take the “high road” and not discuss the minutia of details leading to his decision. The Board has honored that request, and in doing so, have, in part, exposed the College to some degree of criticism for not being “more open”. However, we are committed to honoring our agreement with Brian, and ask you and others to also respect that agreement.

The Board has at all times attempted to conduct its procedures and agreements with president Bruess in a manner which would preserve president Bruess’s reputation and support his future career endeavors.

We hope this has helped clarify some of the misperceptions you appear to have had regarding president Bruess’s announcement. We thank you for your continued interest in and support of our College community.

Respectfully,

The Executive Committee of the St. Norbert Board of Trustees

cc: Abbot Dane Radecki, O. Praem.
Dr. Brian Bruess
Trustee emeriti