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Trump gets to keep honorary degrees

Lehigh board rejects calls from students and alumni to take back honor awarded in 1988. Wagner board also considered, and rejected, idea of revoking the honor.

By SCOTT JASCHIK

The board of Lehigh University announced Friday that it would take “no action” about the honorary degree awarded in 1988 to Donald Trump at a time when he was growing in prominence as a business executive but was not thought of as a future president. And without an official announcement, so did the board of Wagner College, which awarded Trump an honorary degree in 2004.

In the past two years, some at Lehigh have questioned the appropriateness of the award by the university. Particularly after Lehigh was among the many institutions that revoked an honorary degree to Bill Cosby, the disgraced entertainer, students and alumni have said Trump is not worthy of the honorary doctorate. At that time, the university referenced the “character and high standards” expected of honorary degree recipients. And critics said that Trump, like Cosby, lacked those qualities.

In its announcement Friday, the university said that the board was taking no action, but that it continued to believe in those standards.

The text of the university’s announcement is as follows: “Lehigh University encourages respectful dialogue, discussion and learning about important societal issues. The Board of Trustees remains committed to the university’s values and to its Principles of Our Equitable Community, which recognize each person’s right to think and speak as dictated by personal belief and to respectfully disagree with or counter another’s point of view. These values provide meaningful guidance when deliberating or making decisions that impact the Lehigh community. In considering a petition regarding the honorary degree given 29 years ago to President Donald Trump, the Board of Trustees engaged in lengthy, full and robust discussions. The board has concluded that no action will be taken.”

The current push to withdraw the honor picked up steam after President Trump said that “both sides” were to blame for the August violence in Charlottesville, Va. — a statement that stunned many, given that one side was chanting Nazi and anti-Jewish slogans. A petition signed by more than 30,000 people cited Trump’s response to Charlottesville, as well as his remarks denigrating women and immigrants, accusations that he has sexually assaulted women, and policies that have rolled back legal protections for gay and transgender people to argue that Trump’s record was inconsistent with the values Lehigh says it upholds.

“The various examples presented here just scratch the surface of his divisive and narrow-minded politics. His rejection of diversity and his lack of respect for the differences of others around him stands in direct opposition to the principles laid out here. He does not reflect Lehigh University’s values,” the petition says. “Therefore, he does not deserve to bear the distinction of an honorary degree from Lehigh. To suggest otherwise would ignore and minimize the work of Lehigh’s community to promote diversity and inclusion on its campus.”

Kelly McCoy, a recent graduate of the university, organized the petition. In a letter to the editor of *The Brown and White*, the student newspaper at Lehigh, McCoy blasted the board's decision.

"By refusing to rescind this degree, Lehigh offers tacit support to a man who supports censorship against the media; who profiles Mexicans as rapists and criminals; who reluctantly denounces his core support base of white supremacists (and who was endorsed by the KKK); who wants to rid women of their constitutional rights to their reproductive choices; who disrespects and dishonors veterans — both transgender and cisgender; and who has a general disregard for the principles of democracy, ethics and humanity," McCoy's letter says.

The Brown and White also published a letter backing the board's decision. In this letter, alumna Kristin Lipani Bianco said that she met Trump when she interviewed him, while an intern at *Forbes*, in 1988. Trump was polite then and has been a great leader since then, Bianco said. She added that she was sharing her views "as a representative of the more than 65 million people who voted for President Trump and are proud we finally have someone who's strong enough to expose the dishonesty, corruption, hypocrisy and sanctimony of an entrenched ruling class and its propaganda arm, the mainstream media."

Richard N. Weisman, professor emeritus of water resources engineering, was among the first at Lehigh to publicly raise the issue of Trump's honorary degree, in light of his statements as a presidential candidate and as president. Via email he said he was pleased that the board had discussed the issue, but said that the trustees' statement left many questions and concerns.

"I am deeply dismayed that the board did not state what it was they considered and have the courage to tell the stakeholders how and why they reached its decision," Weisman said. "Did the members discuss Trump's sexual predatory behavior as they did with Bill Cosby? Did they discuss Trump's policies regarding science and compare that to the role of our university, especially one known for programs in science and engineering? Did they discuss Trump's problem with telling the truth and compare that to the very basic role of the university? They acknowledge our principles, but did they discuss Trump's bullying? I believe that our community needs reasons for the decision, but we are left hanging."

Lehigh is not the only college to have awarded Trump an honorary degree. Wagner College did so in 2004. The illustration at right is from a Wagner publication's coverage of that award.

A spokesman for Wagner said that the board there has also discussed the idea of revoking the honor but decided not to do so. The spokesman declined to elaborate on the Wagner board's decision.

Robert Gordon University, in Scotland, awarded Trump an honorary degree in 2010, but revoked it in 2015 based on comments Trump made in the presidential campaign that the university said were "wholly incompatible with the ethos and values of the university."

Liberty University has twice awarded Trump honorary doctorates, in business in 2012 and in law in 2017 (below).

The university said that the most recent honor was for "commitment to his country and to the citizens who have been forgotten by their own government, his unwavering determination to make America great again, and his bold leadership of our nation."