3 for 3: Dordt Gets Engagement Award Third Year in a Row

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President Erik Hoekstra was sitting in an auditorium at New York University with other senior leaders in U.S. higher education when the Wall Street Journal and Times Higher Education announced that Dordt College had, for the third year in a row, been named number one in the nation for student engagement. Hoekstra had been invited to participate in the U.S. Student Success Forum and to be present when the rankings were made public.

At a panel discussion during the summit, Hoekstra and administrative officials from Washington University in St. Louis, New York University, and the University of South Florida shared strategies for improving student engagement.

"Dordt was the only Christian college on any of the panels throughout the day, and we were certainly the smallest school," says Hoekstra.

**THE RANKINGS**

The Wall Street Journal and Times Higher Education created the college rankings based on four pillars that emphasize key areas in teaching excellence: resources, environment, outputs, and engagement. The engagement category comprises 20 percent of the overall score and considers if a college or university effectively engages with its students. Specifically, it examines:

- The level of interaction that students have with faculty and other students while on campus
- The students’ engagement in learning and critical thinking
- The likelihood that students will recommend the college to others
- The number of subjects and accredited programs available.

To learn more about the Wall Street Journal and Times Higher Education rankings, visit 3for3.dordt.edu.
Phil Baty, editorial director of the *Times Higher Education* global rankings and panel moderator, pointed out that "Dordt College, a highly distinctive Christian institution, scores highest on our student engagement survey, based on 200,000 responses from current U.S. students." He asked Hoekstra to explain "the institutional culture that has produced such strongly engaged students, and the policies in place to support students."

"It’s about our compelling mission and our common purpose," says Hoekstra. "As we go about our work together, our faculty spend extra time with our students to serve them not only academically, but emotionally, spiritually, and socially. When faculty act in that manner, students notice and respond positively. It’s that unified commitment to our core mission—namely, ‘to work effectively for Christ-centered renewal in every area of life’—which makes the engagement so strong at Dordt."

Following his panel session, Hoekstra says that audience members thanked him for sharing his perspective as a Christian and as a president of a small college.

"When people from historic and prestigious schools have looked at Dordt’s website ahead of time and want to hear about the ‘secret sauce’ we have at Dordt, it’s a salt and light time for us," tweeted Hoekstra while at the forum.

The student engagement ranking considers to what extent students have the opportunity to interact with faculty and whether the college provides collaborative learning experiences.

"I think that Dordt’s advantage is our ability to engage with students on a personal level," says Hoekstra. He believes that the personalized attention Dordt students receive is what has earned the college its top ranking in student engagement for three years in a row.

Kaysha Steiger, a sophomore business major at Dordt, has experienced that personal attention in her interactions with her professors.

"Dordt students feel like they really matter to their professors," says Steiger. "And Dordt staff members do a great job of getting students involved in on-campus activities throughout the year. I’ve found that Dordt is a place that puts community first."

Dr. Elizabeth (Vander Ziel, ‘03) Blankespoor, the 2018 Horizon Award recipient, recalls how integral her experience at Dordt was in growing her faith and helping her mature.

"At Dordt, you have time to interact with people in a meaningful way and challenge each other to think about what we want out of life and how faith fits into that," says Blankespoor. "A Dordt..."
Dr. David Mulder, an education professor at Dordt, says that faculty, staff, and administrators view their work as a calling and an opportunity to serve students.

"Dordt students are amazing," says Mulder. "Most students who come to Dordt are looking to be stretched, and that’s a big part of what we are about as faculty: not giving students pat answers to challenging questions, but wrestling through thorny issues along with our students and examining them through the lens of a Reformed worldview."

Dr. Leah Zuidema, associate provost, agrees.

"Year after year I continue to be impressed with the passion and expertise that our faculty and staff bring to Dordt," says Zuidema. "They want to be part of a transformative experience for students. They care deeply about our students, pay attention to what interests them, and challenge them to keep growing."

Dordt was not the only Christian institution to be ranked highly in student engagement; Oklahoma Baptist University, Cedarville University, and Harding University were also ranked in top spots for engagement.

"In the broader culture, I think that’s a wonderful witness to the fact that students and faculty are created as image-bearers," says Hoekstra. "The first question posed in Dordt’s Educational Framework is, ‘Who owns your heart?’ When Christian institutions can talk at the heart level, we’re able to more directly address ultimate things that matter. I think that’s what gets students more engaged."