Dordt: What's in a Name?

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ON MAY 13, 2019, DORDT COLLEGE WILL BECOME KNOWN AS DORDT UNIVERSITY. A NEW LOGO WAS UNVEILED AT DEFENDER DAYS IN OCTOBER, AND THROUGHOUT THE 2018-19 ACADEMIC YEAR ALUMNI EVENTS WILL CELEBRATE THE NAME CHANGE.

However, the “Dordt” part of the name will remain.

“With the university initiative, the question arose as to whether Dordt was the right name going forward,” says President Erik Hoekstra. “But there was a swift, overwhelming response that it was, indeed, both compelling and appropriate.”

Dordt’s mission statement declares the institution’s commitment to a Reformed understanding of the world; keeping Dordt in its name demonstrates that ongoing commitment.

Besides, some argue, the college’s name is not only meaningful; it is also unique. In March, the Chronicle of Higher Education launched a March Madness-style tournament on Twitter to “determine which college has the best name.” Dordt was chosen to compete against 100 other institutions of higher education, including Slippery Rock University, D’Youville College, and Moody Bible Institute. Led by Hoekstra, Dordt students, alumni, and other supporters took Twitter by storm, voting their way from the “Tweet Sixteen” to the “Eltweet Eight.” In the end, Dordt made it to the final four before being...
Ah, Dordt,” wrote Steve Kolowich, senior writer at the Chronicle of Higher Education in his article “I Set Out to Find the College with the Best Name.” “I liked it from the start.”

The light-hearted tournament was a good reminder that the name “Dordt” not only reflects its heritage and mission but helps it to stand out.

College and university names that are unique have the potential to be remembered, particularly if the institution’s graduates and outcomes are high quality. Dordt has now been in the top 10 in rankings such as U.S. News & World Report for 15 years and was recently ranked number one in student engagement for the third year in a row by the Wall Street Journal and Times Higher Education.

“In the early years of the school, the name ‘Dordt’ perhaps didn’t have the gravitas to carry such a unique moniker,” Hoekstra says. “But we believe that Dordt now has the potential to become a distinct, nationally-known name, similar to institutions such as Gustavus Adolphus, St. Olaf, or Dartmouth.”

Hoekstra’s sentiments were shared by the college’s founder in his time as president.

“The name ‘Dordt College’ is known and highly appreciated by many, and, I’m convinced, will stand as long as the institution exists,” wrote Dordt’s first president, B.J. Haan, in his memoir A Zeal for Christian Education.

How did the founders settle on the name “Dordt”?

On March 18, 1937, a classis of the Christian Reformed Church met in Austinville, Iowa, to discuss the possibility of opening a new Christian college. Grundy College in Grundy Center had closed its doors three years before, and Christian education supporters saw a need for a new school in the Midwest that could train teachers. In September of 1955, Midwest Christian Junior College, a two-year teacher training school, opened its doors.

But many felt that the name “Midwest Christian” was flavorless; they also wanted to leave open the possibility for offering a four-year program.

In A Zeal for Christian Education, then-Dordt president B.J. Haan describes how “after searching for a name that would describe our educational principles and purposes, we settled on the name ‘Dordt’ after the great synod of Dordrecht, where the confessions of the Reformed Calvinistic churches were adopted.” There was some disagreement between the English spelling of the town’s nickname (“Dort”) and the Dutch spelling (“Dordt”), but the Dutch spelling was eventually agreed upon.

Over the years some have questioned the name “Dordt.” A 1984 issue of the Diamond, the student newspaper, explored the possibility of a name change. Some administrators felt that alumni were having difficulty explaining the name and that another name might have a stronger draw.

However, a subsequent student survey showed that most students preferred the name “Dordt.” And the article received numerous letters to the editor, all strongly disagreeing with the idea of a name change.

“Does this college really want students
who are so narrow-minded that a name prevents them from attending a certain school?” wrote a former student. “We should be proud of our unique heritage and character.”

Dr. John Hulst, the college’s president at the time, agreed that the name “Dordt” was distinctive. “It does associate us with a significant part of our heritage—a part which spoke clearly of glorifying our sovereign God in all we do.”

“I can see one good thing arising from this issue,” Hulst added. “At least we’re forced to ask ourselves, ‘Why do we have our name and what does it mean?’ Our name is important. I hope that we keep ‘Dordt,’ but I hope that we have a greater understanding of the meaning and why it was chosen for our future attitude and direction.”

A SYNOD TO REMEMBER

Dordt College was named for the Synod of Dordrecht (Dort), but what exactly happened at that year-long synod? What made it so important that, 400 years later, Reformed thinkers and historians are celebrating its occurrence?

The Synod of Dort arose as the result of a controversy that had been brewing for many years. Reformed leaders at the time were dedicated to the vision of John Calvin, who saw the entire process of salvation as superintended by the grace of God. The human will, Calvin had argued, was so damaged by the fall that we are incapable of reaching out to God, unless he first draws us to himself.

But another group of people led by Jacob Arminius began to question aspects of this theology. They argued that, despite the fall, the human will could understand the need for salvation and reach out to God. They also suggested that it might be possible to resist God’s call, or for someone who had once believed to turn away from God and lose their salvation.

“Arminius was a popular professor at the University of Leiden,” says Dr. Scott Culpepper, history professor at Dordt. “He had a glittering personality and novel ideas, and students were attracted to that. Soon he had a following not just at the college, but among pastors throughout the country.”

Even though the issues had arisen within the Dutch Republic, churches from all over the world wanted to be involved, because the topics were so central to Reformed theology.

When Arminius died in 1609, his followers—known as the Remonstrants—released a statement proposing five points of doctrine that challenged Reformed theology. And soon, the theological conflict became political. Many leading Dutch noblemen were sympathetic to the Remonstrants, while leading pastors held strongly to the Calvinistic Reformed perspective. The Remonstrants began to use the power of the state to enforce their views, putting in place local militias throughout the provinces to protect those who followed their ideas. But when Maurice of Orange, stadtholder (“ruler”) of the Netherlands, became Reformed, he ordered the Remonstrant militias to stand down.

To solve the debate without bloodshed, Maurice determined to hold a synod—a grand council—to debate these theological differences. And even though the issues had arisen within the Dutch Republic, churches from all over the world wanted to be involved, because the topics were so central to Reformed theology. The assembly met for nearly a year, and the resulting decisions, which became known as the Canons of Dort, are still confessional standards for Reformed churches today.

“The Canons helped clarify the nature and power of divine grace in a way that has formed the Reformed theological imagination for 400 years,” says Dr. David Henreckson, Dordt theology professor.
and director of the Andreas Center. “It articulated the efficacy of God’s grace, his all-loving care for us, the way he draws us to himself in the person of Christ through the power of the Spirit, and our utter dependence upon his grace for every good thing we enjoy. That grace ought to drive us to gratitude: to turn us outward toward our neighbor in thankfulness for what God has given us. All these ideas flow out of the decisions made at the Synod of Dort 400 years ago, and they are still a part of our Christian life and service today.”

WHAT’S IN A NAME?

“The Synod of Dort shaped all of Reformed theology,” says Culpepper. “Not just the Dutch tradition, but English and Scottish Presbyterianism as well. A lot of people are influenced by its theological legacy every day and don’t even know the history of it.”

“Not many people actually know what happened at the Synod of Dort, but there is an awful lot of tangible residue from that important event that is still very evident in the way people live and talk,” says Mark Volkers, a digital media professor at Dordt.

Volkers says that, whether they recognize it or not, Dordt students and graduates live in ways that demonstrate the Reformed principles that emerged 400 years ago in the city of Dordrecht.

And those principles affirm that the name “Dordt” best fits the institution that was known as Midwest Christian Junior College back in 1955.

“Today, Dordt University best describes who we are and who we are becoming,” said President Erik Hoekstra as he announced the name change to students and the press. “Over the years, we have developed academic and co-curricular programs that grow out of our mission to prepare students to serve in the professions they enter and the communities in which they live. Dordt now looks and acts more like a university than a college. But it is still Dordt.”

—Mark Volkers, digital media professor

Each delegate who attended the Synod of Dort received a medal. One side of the metal displayed a view of the Synod of Dort, and the other side showed a view of Mt. Zion being battered by the personification of the four winds.

“What’s In a Name?

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In August, the Dordt men’s basketball team took a trip to Holland, in collaboration with Ton Sels, a Dutch businessman who shares Dordt’s Reformed worldview and has helped the city of Dordrecht plan the Synod of Dort’s anniversary celebration.