

## Decade of Diligence

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# DECADE OF DILIGENCE

**A REFLECTION ON DR.  
ERIK HOEKSTRA'S FIRST  
DECADE AS PRESIDENT**



JAMIN VERVELDE ('99)



In a time when most college presidents average six years in their positions, Dr. Erik Hoekstra is enthusiastically completing his 11th year at Dordt University. He follows in a line of presidents who have served the college long and well.

Hoekstra became president of Dordt in 2012 and is only the fourth president in the 68 years since its founding in 1955: Rev. B.J. Haan served from 1957 to 1982—a total of 25 years; Rev. John B. Hulst, from 1982 to 1996—a total of 14 years; and Rev. Dr. Carl Zylstra, from 1996 to 2012—a total of 16 years.

"At just the right time, God brought the persons with the right skills to serve in the role as president," says Professor Emeritus of Theology Dr. Wayne Kobes, who is currently working on a book highlighting Dordt's history from 1982-2012.

Haan served as a charismatic visionary and tireless promoter of Dordt when it was first founded, and Hulst deepened Dordt's Reformational commitment through the creation of integral documents like the Educational Task of Dordt. Zylstra furthered Dordt's academic endeavors by adding programs such as nursing and criminal justice and elevating Dordt's profile by hiring excellent faculty and building state-of-the-art facilities.

It's too early to try to summarize Hoekstra's overall contribution to Dordt University. But it isn't too early to spotlight what has been accomplished in his first decade as Dordt's president, to ask what skills Hoekstra possesses that make him a good fit for this stage in Dordt's history, and to hear what those closest to Hoekstra have to say about his work.

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Every April, the Hoekstras invite upcoming graduates to their home, where they enjoy a meal and chat with students one last time before commencement.

### ABOUT DR. ERIK HOEKSTRA

Dr. Erik Hoekstra was five years old when his father became president at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, Illinois. He remembers sitting at the top of the stairway in the president's home, listening to conversations taking place in his parents' living room. Sometimes he'd overhear discussions with cabinet members or professors; sometimes he'd listen in on chats with leaders from other colleges or seminaries.

"The conversations were fascinating to me, because they were talking about big issues," recalls Hoekstra. "They involved weighty issues on theology as well as the institutions of either the denomination or the college. Sitting on those stairs and listening to my father speak with college professors, seminarians, board of trustee members—whoever was at our house in those times, opened up a whole universe to me."

Hoekstra showed a propensity for entrepreneurial leadership at an early age. He started a lawn-mowing business while in high school; by his senior year, he had five college students working for him. He chose to attend Trinity Christian College for his undergraduate degree in part to keep his lawn-mowing business going.

"He was student body president and homecoming king in high school," says Dr. Barb Hoekstra, professor of education and Hoekstra's wife. "In college, he was an R.A. He was the Lincoln Laureate, which is awarded to outstanding seniors from colleges and universities by the Illinois governor. I always knew he'd be a leader in life; it was something I appreciated about him."

Hoekstra majored in history and philosophy and planned to become a pastor. After teaching a high school catechism course, however, he decided that path wasn't for him. Instead, he pursued a career in business. He and Barb moved to the Netherlands so that he could attend Erasmus University's Rotterdam School of Management, where he earned a Master of Business Administration degree in international management.

After graduating, Hoekstra served for four years as chief operating officer of Eastern Floral and Gift, Inc. in Grand Rapids, Michigan, before moving to Northwest Iowa in 1997 to teach business at Dordt. In addition to teaching, he oversaw the business department's internship program and led the curriculum development process for new emphases in human resources, information systems, and public administration.



"And then a position at Interstates opened up as director of human resources," says Hoekstra. "Sixteen months into my role there, CEO Jim Franken, only 48 years old, died of a heart attack on his way to work one morning." In the months following Franken's passing, Hoekstra took a leadership role, purchasing shares in the company and becoming a partner and principal. Interstates grew to become an \$85 million company operating in the electrical engineering, construction services, and industrial automation markets. He also earned a Ph.D. in organizational leadership and human resource development from Iowa State University during that time.

Then a phone call came from Dordt president Dr. Carl Zylstra: might he be interested in a role as provost at Dordt? Hoekstra decided to apply and was hired, taking on the responsibilities of academic affairs, co-curricular programs, faculty hiring and development, registrar, athletics, institutional planning, and accreditation.

"I remember asking President Zylstra, 'How long do you plan to serve as president?' and he said, 'Well, I'm 60 now, and I won't be president when I'm 70. That's all I'll say.' Three years later when he announced that he was going to retire, it came as a surprise for all of us."

But as Hoekstra knew from experience, surprises can make great opportunities.

What made Hoekstra want to become a college president someday? Beginning with his eavesdropping from the stairs, he developed an interest in institutions and how God works through organizations.

"I love institutions. These days, there's more distrust in institutions and more interest in being individualistic. I think that's wrong—very little important and substantive gets done simply by an individual alone," he says. "When we work together, bigger stuff that can have a long-term impact gets done, and I've always been about that bigger stuff."

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**LeeAnn Moerman has served as executive administrative assistant to President Erik Hoekstra since he first began his role in 2012.**

### LIVING OUT THE MISSION

Dr. Erik Hoekstra's personal mission statement is "growing people and organizations to glorify God and grow the kingdom." Whereas some might craft a personal mission statement and let it

education, as well as the Educational Framework of Dordt, which outlines the basic principles that direct how Dordt implements its educational purpose.

"Our Task and Framework are key to helping Dordt stay true to our mission and vision," says Hoekstra. "Mission statements are important because they're a rallying cry for everyone to get behind, but the Task and Framework are a biblical, educational creed. And the centrality with which that has stayed at Dordt is important, and it's remained just as relevant to who we are as the day it was written."

Every faculty member must incorporate the four coordinates, found in the Educational Framework, into their syllabi and structure their classes with the framework in mind. The four coordinates are:

Religious orientation: who owns the cosmos, and who owns your heart?

Creational structure: how do things hold together?

Creational development: how do things unfold?

Contemporary response: how are we called to respond?

"When I get asked, 'How many theology

66 "He has a professionalism mixed with a love of Christ and a commitment to the Reformed faith. We as an institution have grown in that area, and it's embodied in Erik."

— Dr. Wayne Kobes, professor emeritus of theology

languish on a resumé, Hoekstra seeks to live his out every day.

Take, for example, Hoekstra's commitment to the perspective and the vision of Dordt University. Sometimes growing an organization means staying true to who the organization already is. Hoekstra emphasizes the importance and value of the Educational Task of Dordt, a statement that describes how a Reformed biblical faith impacts



courses do Dordt students have to take?' there are two ways I could answer. The strict answer is one: Core 150, known as Biblical Foundations. But the true answer is that every class is a theology class."

Hoekstra says that his goal as president is to live out the vision articulated in its foundational documents ever more comprehensively and with more energy.

"The vision has remained the same since 1955, and I believe that's why alumni are so passionate about this place. As our alumni are passionate about this place, they give back, and they send their children here. They encourage us, and they pray for us. I think that will enable Dordt to last for a long time."

"Dr. Hoekstra is willing to stand in the breach and take criticism by saying, 'This is who we are. And this is who we're going to continue to be, and we're only going to work to get stronger in being who we are,'" says John Baas, vice president for advancement. "He has an ability to communicate that vision, both on-campus and off-campus. I think we have a common understanding of who we are and where we're going to

a greater extent than you might find at your average academic institution."

"He has a professionalism mixed with a love of Christ and a commitment to the Reformed faith," adds Kobes. "We as an institution have grown in that area, and it's embodied in Erik."

Hoekstra has also quite literally grown Dordt as an organization; in the fall 2022 semester, Dordt's enrollment was 1,858, the largest in the institution's history. This includes a record total degree-seeking undergraduate enrollment of 1,460, 89 percent of whom live on campus. Back in 2012, Dordt's total enrollment was 1,398 students. The university has experienced a 33 percent increase in the past 10 years, whereas, according to Hoekstra, most experts say that the overall higher education enrollment is down by eight percent in the past decade.

"How has this helped advance God's kingdom? Well, number one, it gets more effective kingdom citizens out into the world," says Hoekstra. "One-hundred percent of our class of 2021 graduates were in graduate school or found work

## ONCE A HISTORIAN, ALWAYS A HISTORIAN

Hoekstra has a deep appreciation for Dordt's history, which harkens back to his days as a history and philosophy undergraduate at Trinity Christian College.

There's a copy of *The History of Dordt College* by Dr. Mike Vanden Bosch sitting on his desk, which he refers to regularly. He often reviews historical documents related to Dordt's history to gain further contextual understanding.

"He has a sense for how the history of a place can impact the present and future," says Dr. Barb Hoekstra. "And that gives him a stronger sense of Dordt's identity."



"As a student, I have appreciated the leadership Dr. Hoekstra has displayed in navigating some difficult issues over the past 10 years," says Daniel Draaistra, a business major. "I also appreciate the businesslike focus on continuous improvement he has brought."

JAMIN VER VELDE '99



within six months of graduation, being salt and light in their respective fields. And number two, by keeping biblical truth and Christian worldview central, we are helping students within our historic constituency and helping those previously unfamiliar with Dordt find us."

Although Dordt remains associated with the Christian Reformed Church and is committed to the Reformed Christian perspective, Hoekstra recognized early in his presidency the importance of reaching those who were looking for biblical fidelity—those who might not know what the Synod of Dordt is but who would enthusiastically champion the Founders Vision that "all of the students' intellectual, emotional, and imaginative activities shall be permeated with the spirit and teaching of Christianity."

"Erik is open to new opportunities and possibilities that in Dordt's earlier years would not have been considered," reflects Kobes. "In the past, the walls between church traditions were solid, separating Christians from one

another. Things have changed; the old denominational lines are not as impenetrable or significant as before. Today what matters is being biblically rooted and clearly affirming the Christian faith. Erik was visionary in asking, 'How can Dordt University better serve those who stand firmly in the Christian faith and want to serve the Lord in all areas of their lives?'"

“When donors meet with Erik, they can see his commitment to Dordt’s vision and have confidence that he will continue to stay true to what they love about the university.”

— John Baas, vice president for advancement

Hoekstra's efforts have made a difference. Over the past five years, 59 percent of Dordt students have come from more than 200 high schools in the Midwest, Southwest, Great Lakes, and Mountain regions, as well as from Canada and other countries. Dordt still welcomes students from places like Lynden Christian High School and Calvin

Christian High School, but more students from community schools, homeschool settings, and smaller Christian schools are also making their way to Dordt.

Hoekstra describes his approach as being "hospitably Reformed."

"'Hospitably Reformed' calls our attention to the Reformed character and our deep commitment to it, but it also expands the vision," says Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for academic affairs. "What's resulted in his presidency is a broader group of students with a greater number of backgrounds regarding what schools they attended, what parts of the world they grew up in, and what churches helped raise them in the Lord. It's also meant that we have had to look intentionally at how we're communicating some of our Reformed ideas. How do we make sure we're communicating well with students for whom this is new? And how do we have that happen in two directions so that Dordt is a better place because they're here and speaking into Christ's kingdom?"

In addition, Hoekstra has helped increase Dordt's fundraising efforts.

"About 10 years ago, Dordt raised about \$5 million each year," says Baas. "Last year, we raised \$20 million in one year.

JAMIN VER VELDE (99)



## A GREAT TEAM

One of the greatest joys of his presidency, says Dr. Erik Hoekstra, is that he gets to work with Dr. Barb Hoekstra, his wife. Barb, who has served at Dordt as a professor of education for more than 25 years, teaches every education major and loves getting to know her students individually.

"What I love most is that we both have our respective career paths, but we can do them together. It's been a real joy," he says.

Hoekstra describes Barb as a "people person" who loves to get to know others individually, whether it be an education student or a donor.

"Erik has the 10,000-foot view of what's going on," says Barb. "He has the ability to see how things might work out in the future, too. I tend to focus more on the individual; I like to hear about

what's going on in their lives, what interests them, what struggles they're encountering and what brings them joy."

The Hoekstras' different skill sets and approaches to life benefit the university.

"As the president's wife, I want to make the university a more welcoming place for people," she says. "Whether it's the person picking up our garbage or a formal dignitary visiting campus, I want to ensure that anyone who ever connects with Dordt has a good experience. I try to lead by example and make people feel welcome. I do that together with Erik, and then he adds the business expertise."

"She's great with fundraising efforts, and she loves getting to know our alumni," adds Hoekstra. "It's a joy to work together."





**Dr. Erik Hoekstra led Dordt through the Covid-19 pandemic, which at times called for unique approaches to maintaining in-person learning while also keeping students and employees safe.**

You would be hard-pressed to find a president who is as passionate about fundraising as Erik and one who is as fiscally responsible. In the past when we built buildings, we would fundraise about half of the cost and then take out a loan on the rest."

Now, not only are most of Dordt's building projects funded without debt, but Dordt has also seen donors give \$20 million to student scholarships. Ultimately, these efforts filter down to positively impact tuition and help make college more affordable for Dordt students.

"When donors meet with Erik, they can see his commitment to Dordt's vision and have confidence that he will continue to stay true to what they love about the university," adds Baas. "They also can see his business acumen and entrepreneurial spirit, which is perhaps more exceptional than it should be in academia."

Vice President for Finance and Risk Management Stephanie Baccam ('97)

points out that Hoekstra has also prioritized growing Dordt's endowment. In 2012, the endowment was at \$27 million; by 2022, it reached \$58 million.

"This growth has enabled us to increase the number of scholarships we can award students as well as support general operations to keep tuition from increasing more," she says.

Hoekstra spends more than 65 percent of his time on fundraising efforts, whether working locally or traveling to far-off places.

"What I enjoy most about fundraising is that there are an awful lot of people out there that love Dordt and will give, but there's also another group eager to know more and get involved, as they see the innovative ways Dordt is making an impact for God's kingdom," says Hoekstra. "For instance, some look at the empty pews at their churches and wonder where the young people are. Well, 94 percent of Dordt graduates are active members of local churches, and I've had people tell me that they give

to Dordt because we are sending out graduates who want to be involved in church."

Still, faith formation happens on more than Sundays, and Dordt students (and graduates) are encouraged every day to "work effectively toward Christ-centered renewal in all aspects of contemporary life." That's one of the reasons why co-curriculars have been so important to Hoekstra during his presidency, including athletics.

Crafted in 2018, the Defender Way provides an alternative approach to athletics—one that "calls us to a life of continual improvement, with wins to be had spiritually, academically, as well as athletically," says Director of Athletics Ross Douma. "And those areas are not mutually exclusive. They should not be compartmentalized but interwoven. Erik has really helped to formulate that and impressed it upon other offices on campus."

Based on Romans 12:1, the Defender Way highlights the athletic department's



commitment to competitive athletics.

The four pillars of the Defender Way are:

We are committed to the Great Commission and cultural mandate.

We are committed to equipping student-athletes to be servant leaders.

We are committed to the academic development of all student-athletes.

We are committed to the pursuit of championships.

In implementing the Defender Way, Dordt doesn't need to win championships to be a champion, adds Douma. But it does help that, in recent years, Dordt has seen momentum in both championship wins and the number of athletes enrolled in its athletics programs.

"In 2010, we had about 375 student-athletes. This academic year, we anticipate having 625 student-athletes. And over that time span, the grade point average of our student athletes has increased. In the 2021-22 academic year, all Dordt's athletic programs met the 3.00 cumulative GPA threshold to be named scholar-teams, which is quite impressive."

In addition to enrollment and fundraising goals, Hoekstra has a goal of being a present president.

He tries his best to learn the name of every student by the time they graduate, and he also works hard to be around for on-campus events such as theatre performances, athletic events, music concerts, and gallery openings.

"He has prioritized being approachable to students," says Robert Taylor, vice president for student success and dean of students ('99). "He walks around campus and talks with students. Around Christmas time, he and Barb stop by every dorm room and apartment to hand out candy canes. He makes an effort to get to know students."

“He shares leadership instead of hoarding it. And that's really what allows for innovation and a more entrepreneurial approach to education. He also holds us accountable and asks us hard questions. I think it helps us to think in new and better ways.”

— Dr. Leah Zuidema, vice president for academic affairs

Hoekstra cares about the quality of education students receive while they are at Dordt, too.

"When he stepped into the role of president, Dordt was a strong academic institution with a lot of traditional programs and some professional

programs, and over the last 10 years, he's helped us to stretch in ways that are new to us," says Zuidema.

Hoekstra is known for thinking outside of the box when it comes to higher education and the offerings a university like Dordt can provide. Such an approach is important given that higher education is in a state of flux and undergoing significant changes, adds Zuidema.

"To do education differently, we need a leader who helps us think in new ways," says Brandon Huisman, vice president for enrollment and marketing. "Erik encourages innovation and smart risk-taking where we keep our mission central, care for our culture, and keep a close eye on our margins. We're going to try new ideas and sometimes they don't turn out how we expect—either we gain strong results, or we gain wisdom. It's that approach that provides new possibilities for students."

Hoekstra's openness to new approaches is part of the reason why Dordt chose to start the Pro-Tech program, which has since transitioned to a two-year engineering technology degree as well as a two-year agriculture technical degree. It's why he encouraged the expansion of Dordt's graduate and online programs so that the university now



Every December, the Hoekstras walk to the on-campus dorms and apartments to hand out candy canes. It's a tradition that sparks creativity, including with door decorations.

PHOTO SUBMITTED



offers degrees in Master of Social Work, Master of Public Administration, and Master of Special Education alongside its flagship Master of Education program.

"We're deepening and broadening our engagement and fueling innovation while keeping a passion for the mission and clearly communicating who we are, which helps us with financial sustainability and strength," says Zuidema. "When we do things like expand our programs and expand the base from which we recruit students, we have more room for risk-taking and trying new things, which is attractive to students who are thinking about coming here, and attractive to faculty and staff who are considering working here."

Taking risks and trying new things requires trust. Hoekstra is not operating in a vacuum; he has built a strong leadership team that takes responsibility for their spheres of influence and for the growth of the whole institution.

At Christmas Hoekstra gave each of his administrative cabinet members a metal keychain inscribed with the words "think like an owner." That stood out to Vice President for Operations Howard Wilson, who keeps his attached to his keys.

"He wants us to consider what we need to do to make Dordt more successful as an organization. Dr. Hoekstra thinks systematically about organizational development and what it takes for organizations to grow and prosper. He wants all of us to be bought in on the university's future and what it could be," says Wilson.

"He shares leadership instead of hoarding it," adds Zuidema. "And that's really what allows for innovation and a more entrepreneurial approach to education. He also holds us accountable and asks us hard questions. We're able to challenge each other, give constructive criticism, and receive criticism. I think it helps us to think in new and better ways."

Hoekstra has led in a way that makes everyone at Dordt feel they are pulling in the same direction, says Baas.

"We're not competing with one another. There aren't turf wars between cabinet members. We are all interested in the big, overarching institutional mission more than we are about personal wants. We care about each other as people too, and Erik's leadership has really inspired that."

## AN EXCITING PLACE

What is it about the role of president that energizes Hoekstra every day?

"There's a commonality of vision at this place that hasn't really changed since Dordt was first founded," says Hoekstra. "Even though we've added different majors and compete more strongly from an athletic standpoint, we're still fundamentally the same college with the same purpose that hasn't wavered a bit in 70 years."

Sure, the days can be long—Hoekstra's schedule is jam-packed with work travel, on-campus events, interesting meetings, and other obligations—but "I pinch myself because I'm so thrilled to be here, even after 11 years," says Hoekstra. "I get to show up to work every day and see what God is going to do here at Dordt. It's an honor, a privilege, hard work, scary, and everything else."

Hoekstra has faced challenges during his presidency, and he readily admits that he is not a perfect person. But, in the past 11 years, Dordt has achieved much under his leadership—and those closest to him recognize what he's contributed to the institution.

"I think that Dr. Hoekstra's leadership has been ideal for this particular stage of Dordt's history," says Rev. Aaron Baart, chief of staff. "His unyielding drive,

willingness to innovate, and missional fidelity have definitely made us stronger as an institution."

"Dordt feels like an exciting place right now," says LeeAnn Moerman, Hoekstra's executive administrative assistant, who daily sees the energy with which Hoekstra approaches his job. "It doesn't feel stagnant, and that comes back to the president. He wants us to stay true to our faith and is sincere in how he portrays that."

"He's measured," adds Barb. "Sometimes he'll get mad about little things, but when there's a crisis, he's incredibly calm and can see how to handle the situation best. He works well under pressure."

"He loves serving God through his vocation as president of the university," says Taylor. "This is a really hard time to lead a Christian organization, given what's going on in our culture and the shifts in higher education in general. He's leading well here, and Defender Nation can be proud of that. Under his leadership—with God's leading and blessing—we're being set up to be effective in our mission and calling for many years to come."

"I am glad that he is president," says Kobes. "He's not out of good ideas yet."

SARAH MOSS ('10)



"Erik has a unique set of skills and interests that prepared him well for leadership at Dordt," says Brandon Huisman, vice president for enrollment and marketing.

JAMIN VER VELDE ('99)