

Jan 29, 2020

Town Hall Meeting about Watkins-Belmont Merger

All text is paraphrased based on my written notes and should not be taken as direct quotes. Full video of the meeting is available here:

<https://youtu.be/s2w8eBRC0Rc>

Prior to the start of the meeting Dr. Kline, the Belmont Provost Dr. Thomas Burns, and some Watkins staff and faculty are inside the theater with the door closed. At least 100 students are waiting outside the theater.

Student Life Director Jerrica Mayo asks everyone to quiet down so she can make an announcement.

Jerrica Mayo: Student conduct has been in question. If students violate the student code of conduct, they will be removed. If you are disruptive it will fall on me and Cary Beth, please don't put us in that position. If you have respect for me, you won't do that to me.

At about 12:10 we file into the theater. It is mostly full with a few empty rows in front. Several people are filming.

Dr. Kline introduces Dr. Burns, Provost at Belmont.

Dr. Burns: It is a very difficult time and I certainly understand what you are feeling. We're really excited to welcome you to Belmont and continue the legacy of Watkins. Our promise to students is that you will continue to pay Watkins tuition. Tuition is always raised incrementally at both Watkins and Belmont annually, so your tuition will be raised over time, but based on the Watkins rate.

We want to keep you on the same track to graduate on time. We have a lot to prove, so you'll have to judge us by our actions. On Feb 4 at 3:30, we will be inviting you to a tour of campus to meet faculty.

Watkins student life director: Our students have come to me with a list of questions and concerns, can we start with those and then go to individual questions?
(proceeds)

Our students are concerned about discrimination issues, specifically for LGBTQ and trans students.

Dr. Burns: We have a non-discrimination policy at Belmont that includes sexual orientation. There is an LGBTQ student organization on campus at Belmont called Bridge Builders that has been around for 10 years, I helped work with students to form it in its inception. We do have trans students on campus.

Student life: Does Belmont respect preferred pronouns?

Dr. B: We don't have a schoolwide policy on that. I expect that teachers will have conversations with students individually about that but imagine that they will respect pronouns. Legal documents such as transcripts must reflect the legal name.

Dr. K: that's true at Watkins as well.

Student life: What resources exist for LGBTQ students?

Dr B: We don't have any policies that differentiate any particular group or class. But we do have a nondiscrimination clause in our student charter.

Student Life: Are there single stall bathrooms on campus

Dr. B: yes

SL: Disability accommodations?

Dr B: We have an office of student accommodation

SL: Will support animals be accepted into residence halls?

Dr B: Yes with documentation

SL: What about housing for trans students?

Dr B: It's not an issue. We don't have anything like a designated gender neutral dorm. There is a housing draw based on seniority where you can choose your roommates. The dorms are apartment style.

SL: Will housing prices stay the same?

B: yes

SL: Do you offer health insurance for students?

B: We require students to have health insurance, but the school does not provide it. We do have a no-cost student clinic. Students can be seen for free not including lab fees.

SL: Will Watkins student be required to take religion classes?

B: It depends based on the number of credits that you have. It's a scaled system based on credit hours. So if you are a senior, you'll be finishing out the Watkins curriculum. If you are coming in as a sophomore, you'll be expected to take more of the Belmont curriculum. There are two religion classes that are part of our "BELL Core".

I do want to be clear that this is a Christian institution. However, we will not try to convert you. This is not about indoctrination. It is about the academic study of the work of literature that is the Bible.

SL: Will all my credits transfer?

B: Yes

SL: What will happen to our equipment/studio facilities?

B: Our intent is that we will be good stewards to the equipment. With our merger w/O'More, we brought over a significant amount of equipment.

SL: Will Belmont honor my financial aid and scholarships?

B: Yes.

Students who have transferred from previous colleges will also be able to have their previous transcripts reviewed for additional credits.

SL: What about a student who transferred from Belmont to Watkins and will now be coming back to Belmont? Will previous academic suspensions still apply?

B: We certainly want them to continue at Belmont, and will look at individual circumstances.

Former Belmont student: Is parking going to be accessible? It's hard to park at Belmont. When I was a student there, it was hard to get into classes. It felt like a race for registration. Could priority parking and registration be available for Watkins students?

B: No we can't give you special parking or registration. There's lots of parking in the Curb garage. There will be some special Watkins only classes for upperclassmen that we haven't normally taught. We want everyone to get their classes and graduate on time. Registration is a lot smoother than it used to be when you were at Belmont two years ago.

Watkins student: This all sounds great, but when can we get it in writing?

B: Sure. You need to get this in writing and we will get this in letters to you as soon as possible. I understand that you need to hold me accountable.

Watkins student: Are alumni still guaranteed that they will be able to get free classes after graduation and access to facilities?

B: Don't know yet.

Watkins Student: I would like to present you with this list of wants, needs and concerns to take back with you. These were written with a group of Fine Arts students and faculty.

- We would like the President of Belmont to make a public statement about freedom of expression and nondiscrimination
- We want a written, legally binding document regarding honoring Watkins tuition. We want to be exempt from student requirements that are different from Watkins such as being required to buy a meal plan
- We request to have a different transition liaison than Dr. Kline. We'd like it to be a committee of faculty and staff from Watkins.
- We want studio spaces and senior show spaces equivalent to what we would have received at Watkins
- Clarify the AICAD policies and make sure that our AICAD privileges can come with us

- For the endowment fund that will be generated by the sale of our building, we want to have student and faculty representatives overseeing how scholarships are awarded
- We want to keep our Watkins emails

Dr. B accepts the list from the student.

Another student says, "Can you please respond to these concerns?"

B: I don't have the authority to make these decisions, but I will bring this list back with me and present them.

Student: We'd like to have these concerns addressed specifically in email afterwards.

Film student: I understand that the wording of the merger says that film students will be absorbed into the Belmont motion picture program instead of kept in the Watkins umbrella. Will we still be given the same consideration as other Watkins majors? Will we just be Belmont students?

B: You'll always be a Watkins student. Our intent is to preserve the legacy of Watkins. You'll still have the same scaled transition into the Belmont curriculum as the other Watkins students.

Student: I'm a DACA student. I was previously at Trevecca and they had specific protections for DACA. I was enrolled as a DACA student rather than as an International student. Does Belmont have any sort of benefits like this?

B: There are not specific benefits or penalties within Belmont for this. We do not discriminate or ask you to disclose your citizen status. We do currently have DACA students on campus. You are still treated as a regular student, not an international student. We understand that you aren't eligible for FAFSA and will try to help with need based aid on a case by case basis.

Student: What if you can't afford health insurance or have other financial difficulties such as needing housing?

B: There are state and federal resources available to help you if you can not afford to purchase health insurance. We are a Christian institution and try to help students with financial need.

Student: I have a list of demands from a group of students as well.

- Dr. Kline exercised willful negligence and should not be allowed to move to Belmont. His failure as President has led to this closure.
- The faculty should not be an afterthought in this merger.
- The President of Belmont must make a statement to deliver protections for diverse students. We want a statement of Belmont's website in support of LGBT students.
- Extended withdrawal period must be honored for students who wish to withdraw
- Alumni benefits must be extended
- Comparable media facilities must be available, including film facilities such as the sound stages.

Student: Can we bring our student clubs from Watkins to Belmont?

B: Yes

Student: My understanding is that in order to be a faculty member at Belmont you need to be a Christian. How can you guarantee us the same diverse, open minded education we would have at Watkins if all the faculty at Belmont is Christian?

B: So what I can tell you is that Christinanity is pretty diverse. There is a theological point of view that Christians share, but that doesn't mean that they're not diverse in their thoughts or academic procedures. I have worked in other places, and this is the most diverse faculty I've ever worked with. So yes they are all Christians, but their academic ideals, pursuits, and activities can vary and are diverse. I am confident that we will be able to provide you with an incredibly diverse, well-rounded educational environment. Your opinions and mine might not be the same, that's not to diminish yours or mine but to say that there's interpretation here and I respect that. We're being honest and saying that all of our faculty is Christian, but I don't want you to see that as a worldview that is somehow bigoted or unaccepting or unwilling to engage with people of different faiths, different ideas, or different approaches to life.

Student: I'm a military veteran who transferred from A.I. Does Belmont honor military credits?

B: Yes

Student: You were saying that the staff is all Christian at Belmont. What about our faculty? Are they going to be able to work at Belmont even if they are not Christians?

B: So we do not hire people who are not Christian. So the Watkins faculty who are not Christians would not be able to work at Belmont.

Student: Will we be censored in any way as artists?

B: We do work with our faculty and our students to talk about appropriate audiences, but as far as I know we've never been accused of censorship of student or faculty work. We do engage in conversation about how we might modify language in introductions for plays, for example, to make them appropriate for all audiences. We do have children that come and want to be sure that they feel welcome as well as their parents.

Student: Will there be severance for teachers who don't apply to Belmont?

B: I don't know

Student: Currently we have on-campus counseling available. Will there be on-campus counseling for students?

B: Yes we have 7 full time counselors for 8000 students. We have a variety of counseling options, both group work and individual work. We do not serve as a permanent long term counselor for somebody who is already engaged with ongoing professional care, to make sure that we can serve as crisis intervention counseling for everyone who needs it.

Former Belmont student: The art building at Belmont doesn't have 24 hour access, which we have here. Can we have that?

B: We do have several other buildings on campus that offer extended hours. We're open to extended hours based on student needs. Part of it depends on how many students need access to the space and how long. I'm of the mind that nothing good ever happens at 3am, so I'm not crazy about doing that. But we have student monitors and professional monitors. The library is open 24/7.

Former Belmont student: If you take time off of school, will you get to keep the lower Watkins tuition?

B: Don't know

Former Belmont student: Is "WELL-Core" going to be required?

B: "WELL-Core" is 60 hours of extracurricular activities that include options like learning how to start a business or Bible Study. How many hours will be required will be based on how far along you are in the program, in the stacked transfer system.

Watkins student: Please take a moment to consider our non-religious faculty.

Student: Can AP scores from high school be considered? Example - US history didn't transfer in for world history at Watkins

B: Yes but you'll need to have your scores sent to Belmont

Student: Will the period for a full refund be extended?

B: That's a Watkins question

Student: What about equipment that can't be moved such as the darkroom and sound stages?

B: I can't answer that

Student: I was previously a student at Belmont who was perceived as a threat. I was directed by several people to meet with you, and I emailed you, and you didn't even want to meet with me. Why would I want to go back there? This is my home. J, why couldn't we speak out about this earlier? This could have all been avoided.

Dr. J Kline: The decision to make this move came after several months. I was only informed about the possibility of merger early in the Fall. I spent the past year doing everything I could to generate the funding. Our challenge was that we were never able to raise an endowment. There was no will to create one by our trustees.

A couple of months ago a consulting firm was hired to compare Watkins to trends. They found that we were terribly understaffed. They recommended that Watkins create an immediate endowment.

Our enrollment has been increasing very slightly over the past two years, but it wasn't enough. Was there a solution other than a merger? The consultants decided it was in the best interest of the students to merge.

There was a non-disclosure, so I could not discuss it with you. That's how these things are done. Nothing was withheld. The decision to merge was executed on Friday. When we met on Tuesday, you were the first to know. I was not part of the original plan.

I believe that this is the best possible outcome. Otherwise we would have just closed. We do not have the cash to go through another year.

When we scheduled the first meeting with the student body, we were unaware that it was after the 100 day withdrawal period. I didn't want to do that to you.

(Many questions and responses about the last day to withdraw and emails)

Barbara: There are other schools with no endowments. I know there have been faculty meetings where there were possible ideas. Why were the faculty and staff not involved? The faculty wanted to meet with the board. This is disingenuous. You're giving a P.R. statement.

J: The schools with no endowment are closing. I took the faculty senate notes to the board, and they chose not to take those meetings.

(more questions and responses about emails)

Student: Don't you think the bigger issue is that the students don't trust you?

J: I understand why. I didn't solve the financial project. I took on a job that I couldn't get done. I'm sorry I couldn't get it done.

Student: Don't you think that you should be held accountable? Why do you get to go work at Belmont?

J: No conversation has been had with me. The President of Belmont may have made a remark at the press conference about me going there, but we have not had that conversation.

Student: The mistrust started before that.

J: I'm sorry you feel that way.

Student: That's it?!?

Student Veteran: In the military we have a saying, “we have your back.” We just feel like you didn’t have our back.

Student (directed at Dr. B): I’m one of the students who will be moving to Belmont. I’m beyond the number of credits that I can transfer, and will be having my senior show there. The show that I’ve been working towards is about witchcraft. I wonder if this will be allowed. I also want to say that if I’m going to learn religion, I want it to be all religion. I feel like I’m pretty well versed in Christianity. Since I was bought and sold, will I be able to have the education I was promised?”
B: I don’t know what that means.

Adjunct: I will not in good conscience be able to sign a profession of faith. I will miss my students.

Student: Dr. Kline, in the meeting yesterday, we pleaded with you. It seemed to fall on deaf ears. After witnessing our tears and pleas, you made a statement about how historic this decision is and you went to Belmont and told the media how happy you are. Watkins College of Art will be reduced to a name on a building.

Student: If we’re going down Dr. Kline, you’re going with us.

Alum: Dr. Kline, I think you’re smart. The thing about the funding seems disingenuous. This is why people don’t trust you. It’s because you say you don’t know something it’s your job to know.

Alum: (to Belmont) I am a Native woman and a Watkins alumni, and I would have never invested my money knowing it was going to a faith that committed genocide against my people. I hope that the students who don’t have a choice but to go to your school will be welcomed and accommodated as well as they can be, because this is not something that they asked for. And I hope that you make a safe space for people of other backgrounds who may not have a choice for where they go to continue their higher education.

Dr. Kline: All right, we’re out of time.

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Full video can be seen here:
<https://youtu.be/s2w8eBRC0Rc>

Open Letter and Petition by Quinn Dukes
https://www.change.org/p/bill-lee-open-letter-to-the-president-of-watkins-college-of-art-and-board-of-directors-0a3d1485-605c-4f46-8fdd-4949bfc1ea6?recruiter=2907752&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink&utm_campaign=share_petition&utm_term=Search%3ESAP%3EUS%3ENonBrand%3EExact