



AMHERST COLLEGE
THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES

January 26, 2016

Dear Member of the Amherst College Community,

During the past several months President Biddy Martin and the members of the Board of Trustees have had scores (all right, hundreds) of communications from alumni, students, and others about the matter of Lord Jeffery Amherst. The communications reflect and embody many points of view. A lot of them begin with something like the following: "I know there are far more important issues facing the College, but...."

And I agree—with the first part of the sentence and also with the "but." The controversy over the mascot may seem small in itself and yet in many minds it's symbolic of larger issues. The controversy is bound up with feelings about matters as specific and recent as the protests at the College last fall and as broad and old as the College's mission and values. It's bound up with personal memories and personal experience. I'll come back to the mascot shortly, but the larger issues deserve some recognition first.

In all of history there have been only about 40,000 of us—I'm counting the students at Amherst now and everyone who has ever graduated. Of these, some 23,000 are alive today. There's a span of more than 70 years between the oldest alumni and today's first-year students. The oldest had parents who were born in the 19th century. In a couple of years we'll be giving tours to prospective applicants born in the 21st. The accident of time alone makes us a diverse group—diverse in opinions, in outlook, in knowledge, and in our life histories. For all those differences, time and again I've seen people with an Amherst background but from different eras get thrown together—and watched animated conversations blossom as if from nowhere. And, of course, those conversations are not actually blossoming from nowhere. They have roots in what former president John William Ward always called "this place."

Two elements of "this place" are central. The first is the nature of the education. There are characteristics of Amherst students and graduates that transcend any one generation or moment in time: a propensity for breaking down arguments into component parts; the ability to write and speak and make a persuasive case; a willingness to listen; an urge to contribute; a presumption of mutual trust. There's a certain intensity, too. Amherst has always been a place where students express themselves vocally, sometimes to the consternation of alumni—who, having sprung from that exact same stock, express themselves vocally in return. This can get boisterous, but it's something to celebrate. And it all has the same source: the intimacy and rigor of the teaching, the lifelong bonds with mentors and friends, the small size of the school, and, for all I know, the hilltop location. Whatever the ingredients, they were present "then" and they are present now.

The second element is the institution itself, and how it has evolved. The history of Amherst has a clear direction: it is toward ever-greater range and inclusion—regardless of any student's means—and toward making that range and inclusion work as an educational and social reality. We started out as an institution to prepare indigent youths for the ministry, then broadened out

into a liberal-arts institution that prepared students for every walk of life. We were a local institution that became a regional institution and then a national and global one. We were all male and then became coeducational. We were predominantly white and now have a student body in which four students out of ten identify themselves as persons of color. Range and inclusion—of people, of subject matter, of outlook—is part of our heritage. Every step along the way required adjustments. Sometimes there was dismay. Success always took time.

Now we are at 2016. Amherst is one of a handful of institutions at the forefront of an enterprise that is both urgent and overdue: making the finest liberal-arts education available to the kind of diverse population this country actually has, and doing so in a residential setting that functions as a true community. This is a microcosm of the larger challenge that faces America as a whole. In higher education, there is not a long history of “best practices” to rely on. Institutions like Amherst are feeling their way forward. This work has had consistent support from everyone in the Amherst community, including our alumni, whose commitment to the College runs deep. But the task is not easy, nor should we expect it to be.

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The mascot question arose anew in this context, starting some while ago and intensifying over the past year and a half. Certain basic facts are broadly familiar. The town of Amherst was named after Lord Jeffery, and the College was named after the town. Lord Jeffery had no connection with the College and died a generation before its founding. Lord Jeff was adopted unofficially by students as a mascot roughly a century ago. The College itself has never officially adopted Lord Jeff as a mascot—or adopted anyone or anything else as a mascot, for that matter. Those who dislike the symbolism of Lord Jeff have various reasons for their view, but a central one has always been his suggestion, in wartime correspondence, that smallpox be used against Native Americans. Nothing may have come of his proposal, defenders counter; they add, for context, that harsh tactics were employed by both sides in the conflict. Thinking about these events leads immediately into gnarly debates about how we understand history, about the very nature of war, about the weight we give to words and actions, and about who has standing to render moral judgments.

One can go around and around with these and other questions—which is what many in our community have been doing. It is in the nature of this place that people would. The scholarship is voluminous and does not speak with one voice. It is not the role of the Board to hand down a verdict on all these questions. What is beyond dispute is that the symbolic figure of Lord Jeff has become a source of division among us today. In part the division reflects the impressively broad constituency that is the College and the alumni body. Almost all students (85 percent) and faculty, and more than half of the 6,000 alumni who voted in a recent ballot (52 percent), have an unfavorable view of Lord Jeff as a College symbol. About 38 percent of voting alumni have a favorable view. The rest of those voting indicated that they don’t have an opinion or don’t care. The level of participation in this vote was similar among the various classes. Hundreds of people have voiced their opinions in an online forum hosted by the College; any reader will safely draw the conclusion that neither the “pro” nor the “anti” side is going to convert the other. So Amherst College finds itself in a position where a mascot—which, when you think about it, has only one real job, which is to unify—is driving people apart because of what it symbolizes to many in our community.

Everyone voicing an opinion wants what he or she believes to be best for Amherst. Defenders of the association with Lord Jeff come from all ages. Many of the defenders among our alumni have supported the College for years. They rightly cherish memories of their own time at Amherst even as they have helped the College change in new directions. Their attachment to the mascot is understandable and, to state the obvious, there is nothing invidious about it. Critics also come from all constituencies and ages. They do tend to be younger overall and, in some cases, to be students and graduates of an Amherst that is becoming increasingly diverse. If they find the mascot offensive regardless of anyone's intentions—and they truly do, and have spoken about this in very personal terms—then that is a significant reality and it needs to be taken seriously. It is fair to recognize that historical context may influence, or make us cautious about, judgments concerning Jeffery Amherst the man. It is equally fair to decide that 18th-century standards should not govern a 21st-century choice of symbol. This is not about political correctness; it is about present community. Amherst is a college environment in which young people spend their everyday lives for a long period of time. Everything flows from the success of that experience, as it did for those who have been out for 5 or 40 or 70 years. We care about this place because of what happened when we were there. We want current students to enjoy the same bond with the school that former students do. Students today will be the school's stewards tomorrow.

At its meeting on January 21 and 22, the Board of Trustees discussed the issue of mascot and symbolism. It was a wide-ranging and intense conversation, one that ranged among many topics: historical understanding, tradition and community, past versus present. We did not agree on every point. In the end we came to a decision, not quite unanimous, that represents the strong collective view of the board.

Lord Jeff as a mascot may be unofficial, but the College, when its own resources are involved, can decide not to employ this reference in its official communications, its messaging, and its symbolism (including in the name of the Inn, the only place on the campus where the Lord Jeffery name officially appears). The Board of Trustees supports such an approach, and it will be College policy. The Inn's new name will reflect its deep connections with Amherst College and the town of Amherst. Beyond that, people will do as they will: the College has no business interfering with free expression, whether spoken or written or, for that matter, sung. Period. We hope and anticipate that understanding and respect will run in all directions. To those who argue that stepping back from Lord Jeff as an unofficial mascot takes us down some sort of slippery slope that calls into question the name of the town or the College, the board would respond that you can find slippery slopes anywhere you look, that real life isn't a philosophy class or court of law, and that people long ago figured out the common-sense way to deal with slippery slopes: just draw the line. Amherst College will always be the name of the school.

As for an official mascot: should Amherst adopt one at long last? Judging from online commentary, there is strong sentiment in favor of the idea. Judging from online commentary, there is also strong sentiment that it should not be a moose—though scores of other suggestions have been floated. (It is clear that people have not lost their senses of humor.) Adopting an official mascot isn't something that can or should be done by decree. The College will ask a joint group made up primarily of alumni and students to create and oversee a process that will consider a variety of mascot ideas and whether the College should officially adopt one. There is no specific time frame for this. The aim will be to generate as much engagement as possible, and

to find something—something organically associated with Amherst, reflecting our collective history—that we can all rally around. That is what mascots are supposed to provide.

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Times change, people change, standards change—this is inevitable. That the discussion of the mascot has been passionate was inevitable too. The discussion aggressively took on a life of its own during the past year. With benefit of hindsight, one can ask whether it might have been possible to invent some deliberative historical inquiry years ago that would have produced a spirit of concord. Perhaps. But no process would have altered the central question: what is the right thing to do? Which leads back to where we are as a college.

I think often of coeducation, a move that many in my generation were active in promoting in the early 1970s. Making coeducation work took decades and required changes large and small. We owe special gratitude to the women of the 70s, 80s, and 90s, who were trailblazers and, as students, held the College to account. Some will recall that Lord Jeff flared as an issue even then, because of his gender. We're embarked today on an effort that will likewise require changes large and small. The ambition is to make Amherst College a place where all three words in the phrase "diverse intellectual community" have as much meaning as the middle one has always had, and to demonstrate that the kind of liberal-arts education we value, and that has shaped each of us, is incomparably matched to this ambition. The task is educational and it is cultural. It means sending graduates into the world who can be effective across boundaries of every kind in an increasingly global environment. It means equipping them with respect for diversity in many forms, including points of view and modes of argument, and with a bedrock commitment to critical thinking and freedom of expression. It means understanding that our diversity and our values are complementary ingredients of what a liberal-arts education must be. And it requires communication among all parts of the Amherst community, more than we've had, regular and continuous.

We can and will achieve this ambition. We will be proud to have done so. And we will be better for it in countless ways.

Sincerely,



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Cullen Murphy
Chair, Board of Trustees