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Recommended Citation

Haberland, Michelle, "Georgia Southern Signs in front of Confederate Flag Display" (2017). *Faculty Senate Index*. 618.

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Georgia Southern Signs in front of Confederate Flag Display

Submitted by: Michelle Haberland

8/24/2017

Discussion:

Several signs announcing a partnership between Georgia Southern University and the Georgia Department of Transportation have been placed in front of a flag display that includes Confederate emblems and also features a cross atop the American flag at a farm along Interstate I-16. How did Georgia Southern University signs come to be placed in this location? Please explain the processes and departments involved in having the signs placed here. How soon can the signs be removed? Please see the attachments for photos.

Rationale:

Georgia Southern advertising in front of Confederate emblems and a religious symbol is inconsistent with the values of inclusiveness, equal respect and secularism that inform our public institution. A fuller discussion of the steps that led to the placement of these signs can help us to avoid future association with symbols at odds with our public identity.

Response:

Minutes 10-16-2017

There was a follow-up question about Office of Marketing and Communication oversight of GSU signage on I-16 in close proximity to Confederate flags. Jan Southern, Associate VP of Marketing, said that that project signage plan was reviewed and okayed by her office. However, they did not know that there were several sites on I-16 and that it would be put at that particular site. Once she was made aware of the location, she immediately asked that that particular sign be removed. Michelle Haberland (CLASS) said she had also asked other questions that weren't addressed by this answer. The first one was whether there had been any contact between the property owner and Georgia Southern University employees or students. Moderator Pirro said he had not asked that question of Southern. Someone unidentified said the

land was state property. Haberland agreed, but noted that the research site has irrigation going to it, and she suspected it might come from the private farm on which the flags are located, and she had asked about this. Page 11 Moderator Pirro hadn't asked that question of Southern. Haberland had a third question, about whether anyone had spoken to the student involved, whom she understood was African-American. She wondered if anyone had "reached out" to him, separately from the faculty member, to find out how he is doing. Moderator Pirro said that to his knowledge, that had not happened. Haberland said, "Maybe I'm the only one that cares about this. . . . we don't care anymore." Moderator Pirro said, "I'm the moderator; I can't care." He moved on.

Minutes 9-6-2017:

[Georgia Southern Signs in front of Confederate Flag Display](#)

(Secretary's Note: Prior to the start of the meeting, Michelle Haberland [CLASS] had placed at every seat photographs of these signs at this location along I-16.)

The SEC received a Discussion Item request from Michelle Haberland (CLASS) about GSU's signage on I-16 near Confederate flags. Moderator Pirro contacted Trip Addison (VP for University Advancement and External Affairs), who directed him to Roger Purcell, chair of Civil Engineering and Construction Management. Purcell explained that a Biologist at Georgia Southern, who was doing research on wild grasses and flowers on highway margins, had been working with the Georgia Department of Transportation and a faculty member in Purcell's department to find an appropriate site for experimental plantings. The criteria for choosing a site included such factors as distance from the highway, visibility, and safety. The placement near the Confederate and religious symbols was not in any way intended to link Georgia Southern with neo-confederate ideology. The signage was removed within days of it being noticed by commuting GSU faculty and staff. The SEC concluded the issue should have been put forward as a Request for Information rather than a Discussion item, so it was not put on the agenda to be discussed, though questions could be raised.

Michelle Haberland (CLASS) asked when the signs were installed.

Pirro didn't know, noted that she had noticed them on August 24, and that on August 29 he himself noticed that they were gone. President Hebert said that when he found out about them from VP Addison, "they felt highly motivated to remove the signage as soon as it could be done." He noted that Dr. Purcell had told him that when there are collaborations between the Department of Transportation and another entity like the University the policy is to have a sign indicating that collaboration.

Haberland asked who ordered the signs to be made. Pirro said his understanding was that was the state DOT. Haberland found it “funny” that our Marketing and Communications department was minimally involved given how protective they are of our emblem – somehow the DOT got the emblem from them but they didn’t ask where the signs would be located.

Haberland then asked if there had been any contact between the property owner and any Georgia Southern University employee, faculty, or students. Pirro did not know. Haberland pointed out that one of the photos shows irrigation hoses and wondered where the water came from. She was concerned that we had a connection with that farm and would like to see that connection severed. She also asked how we got into this situation and whether the DOT knew that these signs were placed under Confederate flags and religious symbols. Pirro did not know.

Haberland asked if Pirro knew of any processes being put in place to avoid such situations occurring again. Pirro said we could ask President Hebert that question at the next meeting he attends.

Haberland wondered if we can estimate how many students saw those signs under those flags; she estimated hundreds. She thought it was a problem that only two people complained about the signs. She found it “strange” that Marketing was so concerned with our public image, and yet this had happened. She thought it harmed our university. Robert Costomiris (CLASS) asked if somebody from Marketing was present who could answer those questions. Nobody was, so Pirro suggested we invite someone to the next meeting or pursue the answer via an RFI.

Jake Simons (COBA) raised a point of order. It was his understanding that this was not supposed to be a discussion item on the agenda and wanted to determine whether we should therefore be discussing it.

Moderator Pirro agreed with the objection and wanted to move on.

Ted Brimeyer (CLASS) said he would like such an RFI to look at GSU licensing agreements and wondered if University policies considered such licenses “in terms of morality or putting, you know, confederate symbols on t-shirts along with the Georgia Southern symbol.”

Peter Rogers (CEIT) knew the researcher involved in this project and so had some first-hand knowledge of the project: GDOT selected that project site, and there are

multiple such sites. The researcher did have some liberty in terms of where in that @ 120 foot long plot to put signs, but GDOT had requested that they put up the signs to announce the project, and also to keep people from interfering with the project. As far as Rogers knew, they had no contact with the property owner; the land was GDOT right-of-way.

Haberland asked if he knew anything about the irrigation. Rogers did not. Haberland then wondered if the faculty member somehow hadn't seen the flags, or did but "didn't hesitate and say maybe we should think this through."

Rogers said the researcher was not from the United States, but from "a country . . . where they don't necessarily think so much about religious sensitivities and so forth." The researcher simply followed GDOT's requirements without understanding the significance of the Confederate Flag, or without thinking much about it.

Haberland (CLASS) wanted "us to all think about for a moment what would have happened if this went to social media . . . how damaged our University would have been. And how all that work that we have done to redefine that word 'Southern' right, and make it what it should be and I just, I mean, given the restrictions in placing signs on your office door, it just struck me as a really amazing colossal mistake. . . we need to insure it never happens again."

Attachments: [FullSizeRender](#)
[Image](#)
[FullSizeRender](#)