



March 11, 2020

Dear 2020 National Debate Tournament qualifiers, coaches, and judges:

As many of you learned on March 10, 2020, the National Debate Tournament (NDT) Board of Trustees (Trustees), in consultation with the NDT Committee, voted unanimously to cancel the 2020 NDT scheduled to take place at James Madison University (JMU) on March 26-30. The Trustees took this unprecedented action because hosting the tournament as planned became a logistical impossibility and presented health concerns to our community due to the potential spread of COVID-19. This letter is intended to explain our reasoning behind this difficult decision.

The Trustees are comprised of academics, educators, coaches, and public advocates who all share a common commitment to ensuring that the opportunity to participate in the NDT is available to debaters now and into the future. We exist for the sole purpose of facilitating the finest evidence-driven policy debates in the world. We know that students and coaches across the country have put thousands of hours of work into preparing for this national competition. However, the Trustees were required to reach a decision regarding the cancellation of the 2020 NDT because we are responsible for the long-term financial integrity of the NDT, approving the location of the NDT, and executing agreements related to the NDT.

The Trustees have been monitoring developments related to COVID-19 and until very recently we believed that, while a small number of teams and judges could be forced to withdraw from the tournament or participate remotely, the NDT would proceed as planned. Over recent days, and with the NDT only two weeks away, rapidly developing facts gathered from many sources necessitated yesterday's vote. In particular:

- Multiple NDT participants were required to withdraw because of university-imposed travel bans. Reports from other institutions indicated that more withdrawals in the coming days were nearly certain, and that the overall number of withdrawals could be significant. Further information received by the Trustees indicated that these travel restrictions will likely remain in place through at least mid-June.
- The health risks posed by hosting the tournament have become more apparent and concerning. Universities, companies, and governments have increasingly warned citizens against non-essential travel, large indoor events, and close contact with others. The State of Virginia, where the NDT was to be held, reiterated such guidance during the course of our deliberations, and it appears increasingly likely that a state of emergency may be declared in Virginia. Exposing students, judges, observers, and school or hotel staff to COVID-19 during the course of the NDT could result in significant health harms to our community and significant liability for the NDT.
- The logistical impossibility of hosting the NDT became clear. The NDT and the host university have agreements with vendors, such as the hotel and caterers, that could result in significant financial liability to the NDT if dwindling participation resulted in canceled



bookings or services contracts. While contractual costs did not serve as the motivation for cancellation, a timely decision was important because the earlier that the Trustees could address the situation with vendors, the more likely it is that the Trustees could minimize the risk of the NDT facing tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of dollars in liability.

The Trustees reached the decision to cancel the 2020 NDT at JMU after concluding that hosting the tournament was impossible and imprudent in light of the safety, logistical, and financial concerns. This was not an easy decision, and we greatly appreciate the fact that Mike Davis, JMU, and the JMU debate team have been remarkably patient and helpful through this difficult process. Unfortunately, the very things that make the NDT a unique and irreplaceable experience for participants—the tireless teamwork, the face-to-face interaction, the public performances and celebrations—are also what make the tournament a risk to participants and others.

As we move forward, the Trustees will continue to work with the NDT Committee and others to explore and develop alternatives—such as online debates—that may help fill some of the gap left by the cancellation of this year’s NDT. Our focus is, and will remain, on providing opportunities for students to debate. This includes trying to retain as many aspects of the NDT as we can. Sherry Hall will be reaching out to the schools that have already paid their fees about refund options, we are developing plans to ensure that participants receive their honorary mugs, and that there are other tools to recognize and celebrate debaters, particularly Seniors. For example, we are planning on creating a digital tournament participation book that provides an online location to recognize participants and we will be releasing more information those plans soon.

Since 1947, the NDT has served as a home for country’s most rigorous, complex, and demanding policy debates. While the loss of the NDT at JMU this year is deeply unfortunate, we remain committed to ensuring that the experience of competing at the NDT continues to be an option for students long into the future.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in red ink, appearing to read "J. Zive", is written over a thin red horizontal line.

Joshua Zive
Chair
National Debate Tournament Board of Trustees

CC: Sherry Hall, Coach and Administrative Director, Harvard Debate Council; Treasurer and Member, NDT Board of Trustees

Dr. Karla Leeper, Executive Vice President for Strategic Communication and Chief Marketing Officer, Augusta University; Member, NDT Board of Trustees



Dayvon Love, Director of Public Policy, Leaders of a Beautiful Struggle; Member, NDT Board of Trustees

Dr. Edward Panetta, Professor & Department Head, Department of Communication Studies, University of Georgia; Member, NDT Board of Trustees