

# Graduation prayer a divisive issue

First Amendment issue under dispute

by Anne Rajotte  
managing editor

Students, faculty, and administrators have expressed mixed opinions about Behrend's continuing insertion of a period for students to say prayers at graduation ceremonies.

Since 1996, when Behrend ended clergy-led prayers at graduation, two students have been invited to make opening and closing remarks at each of the two graduation ceremonies and the one convocation ceremony during the year. The opening remarks are generally for thanksgiving and the closing are for good wishes. The content of these remarks are decided by the student; they may be secular or a prayer. The students who make these remarks are chosen for their good scholarship, involvement, and diversity.

Dr. Chris Reber, Dean of Student Affairs, states that there have been a few objections to the practice from students and faculty. There has also been support for the prayers, though a smaller number have voiced it.

University Park dropped clergy led prayer in 1992 because of the difficulty in scheduling clergy in their numerous graduation ceremonies. Although this coincided with a 1992 Supreme Court decision, *Lee v. Weisman*, where it was decided that prayer at middle school and high school graduations was unconstitutional, Reber states that the decision to stop all prayer at graduation was not influenced by this case.

Dr. Reber asserts that he has been advised that the practice of student



photo by Jessica Trzeciakowski

Dr. Chris Reber, Director of Student Affairs, speaks on the issue of prayer at graduation at last night's SGA open forum. In the foreground is SGA secretary Michelle Benjamin.

prayer, "is sound from a legal standpoint." He went on to say that this is a meaningful experience for many families. Dr. Reber also emphasizes that there is no requirement for the remarks that the students make; it is their choice whether the remarks include a prayer or are secular. The majority of the remarks do include a prayer.

Michelle Kladny, 07 History, president of the Newman Association states, "Everyone has a right to reli-

gious freedom. Prayer should be available at commencement, because during college many students discover their faith. Those who have a conflict with this view should just observe a moment of silence."

The constitutionality of prayer at graduation has been questioned in the past. In the case *Tanford v. Brand*, a law professor at Indiana University's law school, James A. Tanford, and two law students challenged the prayer said at graduation. They as-

serted that prayers had been said at graduations for a number of years and a member of the clergy would always deliver these prayers. The University had always invited an individual with monotheistic beliefs to lead. The audience is directed to stand during the prayers. Tanford, as part of his official duties was required to attend graduations on a rotating basis with other faculty members and objected to being a participant in a state-sanctioned religious exercise.

The students and Tanford also stated that attendance at graduation ceremonies is obligatory. Including a prayer at the ceremony can be considered state-sponsored and state-directed religious exercise in a public school. Furthermore, by only including a prayer based on monotheism, the University is favoring or endorsing it over other belief systems. This case was dismissed by District Court Judge Sarah Evans Barker for lack of standing and was turned down in a federal appellate court earlier this year. The U.S. Supreme Court turned down an appeal to hear this case last month.

It was ruled in the 1992 case *Lee v. Weisman* that prayer in middle school and high school graduations is "excessive entanglement with religion." However, this does not apply to the university level because high school students were deemed subject to peer pressures and not mature enough to deal with the subject fully.

Following the 1992 Supreme Court decision, many public high schools around the country decided to have senior classes vote on whether to set aside time for student-led prayers at graduation. According to Dr. Robert Speel, assistant professor of political science, "this defeats the whole purpose of the first amendment of the Bill of Rights, which is to protect minority interests from majority rule."

Even after University Park discontinued prayers at its graduation, Behrend continued to have clergy-led prayer until the spring of 1996, when the SGA voted to recommend the discontinuation of such a practice. At this point, Behrend switched to student-led prayers.

Speel states that if a student would file a lawsuit concerning the prayers

Question of the Week

Do you believe that Behrend should have student-led prayers at graduation ceremonies?

"No, if it's something within a speech, it's fine. It shouldn't be within the ceremony."

-Chris Venanski, 07, English

"Yes, it's a good thing. God should be part of the ceremony."

-Stephanie Miller, 01, Psychology

"Yes, I think it's important that God should be involved in everything."

-Anthony Armstrong, 01, Graphic Design

"Sure, if it bothers you, tough shit."

-Chico Croyle, 05, Business Administration

"Yes, I came from a Catholic school."

-Dave Madl, 01, Political Science

"I don't care."

-Andrew Heydeck, 01, French

"I find it hard to give an unbiased answer because I find myself biased towards the majority in this case (Christian prayer). However, the intent of student-led prayer is not to force religion down anyone's throat. Religious tolerance goes both ways and not just from the majority."

-Ed Wittmann, 07, MIS

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and others by giving a greater opportunity to test out of classes. Michelle Arnehan, 03, Chemical Engineering, thinks that a seminar class "would be a waste of time" and that it will "take away time that students could be putting towards their major."

Another change is that instead of four credits in health science and physical education students will now only have to take three credits in health science. The reason for this changed is that the committee would like the health sciences to have more "emphasis on life long health and wellness issues rather than short term." Loss said.

Cultural and international perspectives will also be included in most, if not all, of the gen. ed. courses. The teaching styles will start to change also. The emphasis will be more towards active learning instead of passive learning where students just take notes.

Some aspects of the foreign language requirement will also be modified. Students taking a second language at a third semester level or higher may be allowed to substitute those credits towards the satisfaction of their gen. ed. requirement. For example, a student who took French in high school, and decides to take Spanish to fulfill the requirement for a B.A., may take a French class to fulfill gen. ed. requirements.

Students who are in the Penn State system now do not have to worry, because none of the changes will affect them. The changes may be made immediately, such as in the case with the language substitution, or will be phased in and dates will be created for when certain aspects of the recommendations must be in place. The earliest possible start date for some changes may be as early as next year.

Those who are interested can go to [http://www.psu.edu/president/cqi/gen\\_ed/cover.htm](http://www.psu.edu/president/cqi/gen_ed/cover.htm) on the web and view the report in its on-line form.

at Behrend graduation, it could be heard because the Indiana circuit court ruling in *Tanford v. Brand* does not apply to Pennsylvania.

The issue of prayer at graduation has been hotly debated in the past, and continues to be a major issue at Behrend. Reber states, "We want to know how others feel about it."

## Astronomy open house attracts over 200

Speaker instills doubt among guests as to Pluto's planetary status

by John Groller  
news layout editor

On October 30, the astronomy department held one of its characteristic open houses. There was a turnout of approximately 200 people from both Behrend and the outside community. Keith

Noll's presentation, took place in the Reed lecture hall, focusing on the discoveries of the planets Uranus, Neptune, and Pluto, as well as more distant objects that appear to be bodies of ice. These bodies circulate in interplanetary space beyond the orbits of Saturn and Jupiter.

One of Noll's major topics was the possibility that Pluto is not a planet, but one of these bodies of ice, since it does not orbit on the ecliptical plane like all of the other planets. Also, the fact that Pluto is composed of ice contributes greatly to this recent theory.

"I don't think that I would've understood the magnitude of what Mr. Noll was saying had I not been taking astronomy. The whole thing was really interesting and thought provoking," said Marley Stoner, 01, History.

"The whole thing was really interesting and thought provoking."

-Marley Stoner  
01, History

Noll, who received a B.S. Degree from St. Joseph's University near Philadelphia, and who works for the Space Telescope Science Institute which has had a hand in the development of the Hubble space telescope, spoke on behalf of the universe, taking his audience "Beyond Planet X..."

Following his presentation, the audience was invited to the ski slope where the astronomy department set up four telescopes, two of which served to view Jupiter, the other two, Saturn. Fortunately for the participants, it was a very clear night and both planets were clearly visible.

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