

the alexander hamilton center

Throughout the fall term, students were occupied with life on the Hill as usual: class work, extracurricular activities, parties, and the occasional tailgate. Yet, behind closed doors, Hamilton's faculty, administrators and trustees were debating a controversial addition to the campus. Very few students were aware that politics and personalities were clashing over a proposed center. Even fewer understood what implications the debate would have on Hamilton.

Nearly six months after the center was announced and more than three years since the idea was first hatched, the Alexander Hamilton Center for the Study of Western Civilization (AHC) is dead. "It was a loss for the College that the AHC did not go through," said Professor Steve Orvis, chair of the government department. Unfortunately, most students have no idea what happened.

by katie childs '08, jenny brown '07 and doug paetzell '10

Concept

The AHC was proposed by Hamilton Professors Robert Paquette, Douglas Ambrose and James Bradfield. Paquette was selected to serve as the first director of the center.

The AHC was created to promote the study of freedom, democracy and capitalism in the United States. The center would sponsor lectures, host conferences, and award fellowships and internships. It would also encourage scholarship on the role of financial institutions, the connection between economic and political freedom, and the role of the United States in world affairs—all issues that were important to Alexander Hamilton, the College's namesake. Programming for the AHC was slated to begin in 2007, and during its first year, the founders wanted to examine the philosophical idea of slavery. The agenda of the second year would focus on eminent domain, and the third year would be devoted to the study of religion and capitalism in America.

"We were not seeking to talk narrowly about contemporary social or culturally questions—we were more historically focused and guided by standards of academic excellence than simply by our political convictions," said Ambrose. "We were seeking less to promote a specific point of view than we were to promoting high standards of scholarship."

Bradfield believed that the AHC would benefit students, faculty, and members of the local community. "It would have presented a different kind of voice on campus by introducing a different perspective," said Bradfield.

Professor Sam Pellman agreed with Bradfield that the campus community would have benefited from the proposed center because of the diversity of voices it would have created. "The important work we do as a College requires us to foster a diversity of points of view," said Pellman, who chaired the Committee on Academic Policy (CAP) last semester. "The Alexander Hamilton Center could have contributed very much to this."

Former Life Trustee Carl Menges '51 certainly saw benefits to establishing AHC. In the months to come, Menges—an ardent supporter of both his alma mater and the study of Alexander Hamilton—would offer a pledge of \$3.6 million to get the center started. Many of the pledges for the AHC came from conservative alumni, who had grown disheartened by past controversies, including a teaching invitation to former Weather Underground member Susan Rosenberg and a scheduled lecture by Ward Churchill. "We were conscious that [the center] would appeal to alumni who were worried," said Ambrose.

Alumni postings on the Hamilton College Alumni for Governance Reform (HCAGR) website detail numerous alumni who were willing to donate to the center and excited about the endeavor. The AHC offered an alternative fashion for alumni to support the College, according to Peter Brown '73. "I think it was a wonderful opportunity to reengage alumni who had been disillusioned," said Brown, who founded HCAGR last year with his brother Hunter '76 and classmate Benjamin Wu '73. "A lot of alumni were telling us they were done. That struck me as unfortunate."

Creation

Ultimately, the AHC came about because of a friendship between Paquette and Menges, who met eight years ago and discovered a mutual interest in the life and times of Alexander Hamilton. Paquette and Menges began working with the Office of Communications and Development a few years ago to create a book prize that would honor the legacy of Alexander Hamilton. At the time, Paquette and Bradfield were co-teaching a sophomore seminar on the institution of property, out of which came the idea for the center. Paquette approached Menges about the concept of the AHC in 2004. One early option was to have the AHC act as a non-profit entity that would have been separate from the College. This was rejected because funding from alumni donors would need to go through Hamilton: the center had to be a part of the College.

Planning for the AHC intensified in early 2006. Discussions about the AHC were private, which is not uncommon with projects in development. Questions about governance were raised last summer, according to Dean of Faculty Joseph Urgo, who added that some changes to the charter were made. Over the course of the summer, Bradfield met with the Committee on Academic Policy to get their advice on the proposal, and by the start of the school year, the founders and the administration are toasting the imminent announcement of the AHC.

Announcement

A press release by the College on Sept. 6, 2006 announced the founding of the AHC with unbridled enthusiasm. Urgo “characterized the center as “an exciting faculty initiative, one that will draw renewed attention on this campus to the considerable scholarly interest in the life and work of the founder who leant his name to our college.”

In late September, Menges made a verbal pledge of \$2 million to be given to the AHC and asked that the College reallocate \$1.6 million of his prior donations towards the new center.

October

Despite the fanfare that accompanied the announcement of the AHC, by October it was clear that there was going to be a debate over the AHC’s charter. Questions were raised about governance, specifically about the role of the dean of faculty and president in overseeing the center on campus, and also how faculty would be involved in the center.

At a faculty meeting on Oct. 10, a group of professors submitted a resolution urging that the AHC charter be amended. The concerns expressed in the resolution about the charter were four-fold: neither the president nor the dean would have influence upon replacement of the AHC’s Board of Overseers; it was possible for the Board of

Overseers to only have one Hamilton faculty member on it; the term of the director of the AHC was unclear, and could be indefinite; and finally, the charter could be amended without the approval of the president or the dean because of the autonomy granted by the AHC charter.

Professor Steve Orvis helped write the faculty resolution, and acknowledged that the faculty “had no actual power.” Orvis, who chairs the government department, believed that the main problem with the AHC’s governance was its Board of Overseers, the key governing board of the AHC. “The dean has oversight over all similar campus organizations, but he would not have oversight over the AHC, and the faculty was concerned about this,” said Orvis. He also found it problematic that an on-campus college organization could have a board of members that were mostly people from outside of Hamilton.

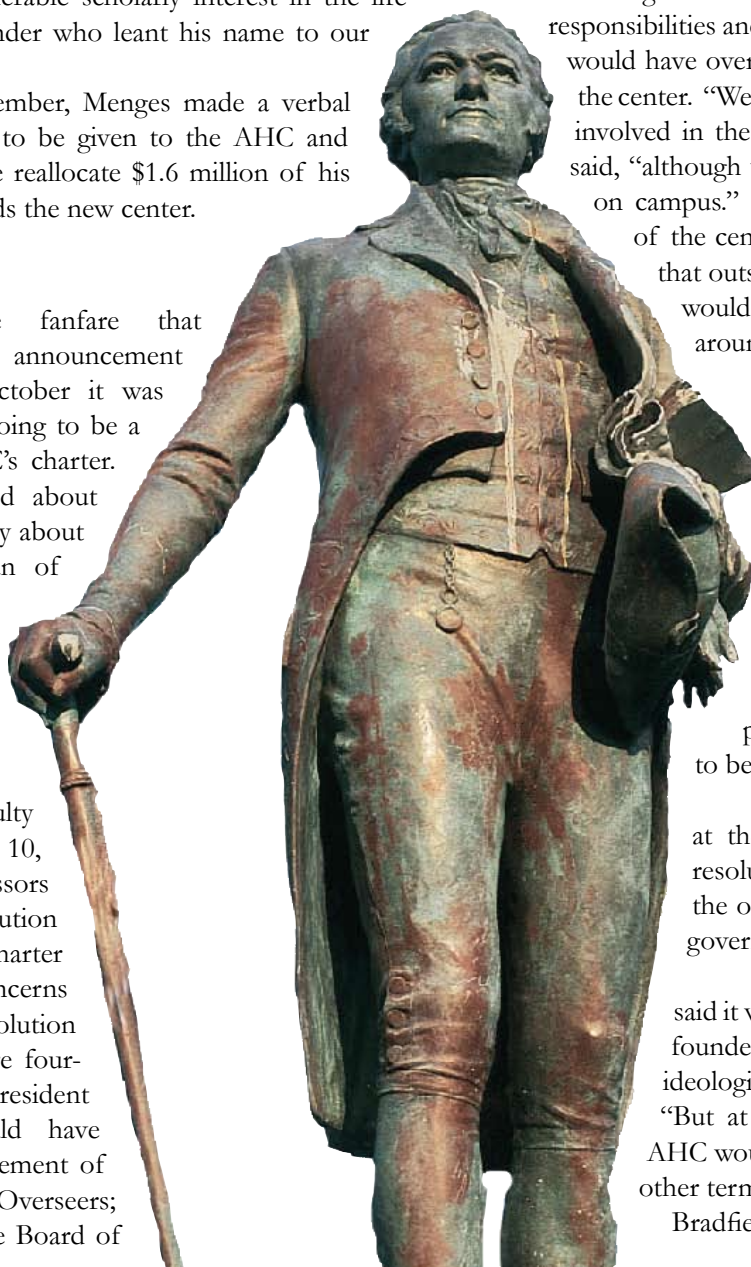
Urgo was more concerned with the fiduciary responsibilities and the oversight that the dean of faculty would have over the AHC, than the role of faculty in the center. “We weren’t looking to have specific faculty involved in the AHC unless they wanted to be,” he said, “although we did expect interaction with faculty on campus.” Urgo felt that one of the strengths of the center’s Board of Overseers was the fact that outside scholars would fill its ranks, which would encourage interaction with scholars around the nation.

Pellman noted that the faculty’s anxieties with the charter did not concern their own involvement, but rather the involvement of the administration in the governance of the AHC. “I truly don’t think anyone on the faculty was interested in being ‘in the loop’ of the governance of the center,” said Pellman. “But the faculty was very concerned that the president and the dean were not going to be substantively included in the loop.”

Professor Kathryn Doran spoke at the faculty meeting on behalf of the resolution’s signatories and reiterated that the objections to the center were based on governance, not ideological differences.

The center’s charter never explicitly said it would be conservative, and indeed “the founders of the AHC claimed it was non-ideological,” said Professor Nancy Rabinowitz. “But at the same time, the charter said the AHC would explore capitalism, democracy, and other terms loaded with ideology.”

Bradfield believes the concerns over the



AHC were predominantly political. “Had the center operated as intended, it would have been transformative in that it would have encouraged students to think in ways that they are not now encouraged to think,” said Bradfield. “I think my colleagues were unwilling to have that sort of thinking.

“I also think there was some retaliation over positions we had taken over Ward Churchill, Susan Rosenberg, and the plagiarism of [former President Eugene] Tobin and the pressure we brought,” Bradfield continued. “Although someone might have disagreements with me, it’s disappointing that they would deny the students this opportunity.”

Pellman disagrees that the faculty resolution was based on personal bias or political leaning. “There is this myth that the ‘liberal faculty’ was jealous of any attempt to subvert its monopoly over the shaping of young minds at Hamilton College,” said Pellman. “There are a number of things wrong

answer would come three days later, however, as the Board of Trustees convened for their annual fall meeting. Chairman of the Board Stuart Scott ’61 “assumed the center would be ultimately under the authority of the president and the Board of Trustees, like everything else at Hamilton College.”

“The trustees are a pretty sharp group of people, including individuals of great accomplishment as leaders in business, the professions, and civic life,” said Pellman. “It does not surprise me that they were able to detect very quickly some very serious flaws with the proposed governance of the center.”

President Joan Hinde Stewart and Urgo had planned to deal with the governance question in a side letter, according to Scott. Several practicing lawyers on the board questioned why a side letter should be used and whether it would have the same force that the charter would carry. They saw a side letter

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about this perception. First of all, it vastly underestimates the intelligence of 17-22 year-old people and, frankly, I think it is insulting. Second, I don’t think the faculty has ever had anything like a monopoly over the intellectual development of students, and it certainly does not have such a monopoly now.”

Ambrose contends that the charter prohibited the AHC from turning into a partisan conservative organization. “What not enough people have commented, regarding the charter, is how it was to restrict the members of the AHC on what they could and could not do under it.” Ambrose said. “If we had tried to turn it into a conservative think tank, we would have violated the charter.”

By the end of the Oct. 10 meeting, the faculty eventually adopted the resolution by a vote of 77 to 17.

“I was not surprised by the vote,” said Paquette. “I predicted to Dean Urgo that ‘five dozen’ faculty would vote against the center merely because of the persons creating it. That we received 17 votes from supporters surprises me.”

Despite the strong support of the resolution, “Dean [Urgo] made it very clear that he was going to ignore us... we had no actual power,” said Orvis. “The Dean told us point blank at the time that he was going to ignore the resolution.”

In an email to faculty on Oct. 12, Urgo stated that the faculty resolution was instructive, yet served only an advisory role. Despite the overwhelming support the resolution, Urgo resisted faculty intervention in the autonomy of the center.

Turning Point

Several people at the faculty meeting asked if the charter could be changed, but received no direct answer. That

as too indirect, whereas amending the AHC charter would provide specific governance language.

“All of the trustees fell into line with that idea, that it really needed to be in the charter and in no less direct way and Joan [Stewart] and Joe [Urgo] accepted that,” explained Scott. “Their plan then was to go back to [to Paquette, Ambrose, and Bradfield] and say, “Okay, it’s not going to be a side letter; we have to amend the charter.””

The trustees were not reacting to faculty concern over the membership of the AHC Board of Overseers. “That was up to the administration to address that in the way they saw fit,” said Scott. Instead, the trustees’ concern was “to make it clear in every level and every way, that all parts of Hamilton College are subject to the management and leadership and decision making of the dean and the president and the board of trustees.”

Urgo said that as a result of the fall board meetings, it became evident to him that the founders of the AHC wanted to remain insulated from the faculty. The center would run parallel to Hamilton, and not be integrated. “That’s when I began to think that this wasn’t a good thing for Hamilton College.”

“Nuclear Option” Creates Impasse

The decisions made at the fall board meetings still left many questions unanswered. “The charter that was posted on the web and circulated was the same charter that we signed with the administration,” said Ambrose. “Something happened where it was accepted, but two months later it was rejected. Something happened at the board meeting in October, and, frankly, we don’t know what happened but we eventually got a

completely revised idea of what the charter should look like.”

On Oct. 14, Paquette learned that the trustees had concerns about the lack of an explicit recognition in the charter of the Board of Trustees’ authority and fiduciary responsibilities. “We requested certain modifications to the proposed governance structure in order to ensure College oversight,” said Stewart.

During the next few weeks, the founders met with Stewart and Urgo twice, and worked on a revised charter. Paquette would not characterize the process as a set of negotiations, however. “As I told Dean Urgo, he should consult the Oxford English Dictionary and compare meanings of the verbs ‘impose’ and ‘negotiate,’” said Paquette. “Let me put it this way: I am confident that if I was put in a locked room one-on-one with Tom Schwarz, a lawyer on the Board, we would have reached a meeting of the minds in about a half hour.”

During the course of the fall semester, six or seven different versions of the AHC charter were circulated. Despite numerous revisions and versions, the founders and the administration could not agree on a few fundamental principles.

On Nov. 22, the founders met with Stewart and Urgo to discuss possible changes to the charter. The founders brought a newly revised charter that included over a dozen changes to the original AHC charter, and addressed all four of the concerns expressed in the faculty resolution on October 10. In the revised charter, a vacant seat on the Board of Overseers would be filled by majority vote, but was subject to the authority of the President and Board of Trustees. Charter membership on the Board of Overseers required the approval of the President and the Board of Trustees. The Board of Overseers would select an Executive Director nominee, and then present the nomination to the President and Board of Trustees for approval.

The longest insertion into the charter states, “The Board of Overseers of the AHC ensures that its policies and operation comply with the resolutions of the Trustees of Hamilton College and their fiduciary responsibilities. The founders of the AHC recognize that violation of those resolutions, disregard of those responsibilities, or deviation from the center’s scholarly mission as clearly defined in the charter may result in the removal of the AHC’s executive director from his office by the president of Hamilton College and the Board of Trustees or the discontinuance of the center’s funding by the College or both. This provision of the charter is irrevocable.”

Discussion at the Nov. 22 meeting was focused on this long passage, which Urgo refers to as the “nuclear option.” Stewart and Urgo felt that they could not accept this language because it would only leave the administration and trustees with one option if a problem arose with the AHC—shutting

the center down. It was this option that led Stewart and Urgo to believe that they were at an impasse with the founders, and would not come to an agreement, despite the other concessions made in the newly revised charter. “If there were other changes, we never saw them because we found that paragraph unacceptable,” said Urgo.

Paquette believed that the revised charter was a “good faith effort” to respond to the trustees’ concerns. “The trustees were told that we ‘proposed the insertion of a single two-sentence paragraph’ into the original charter that ‘would suffice to address all governance issues,’” said Paquette. “That is a lie.”

Stewart told the founders that she would have ongoing authority over the center, which is not uncommon with campus organizations, but it was something that the founders could not accept.

In late November, Scott received a phone call from Stewart informing him that the AHC would not come into fruition. On Nov. 27, the College released a statement announcing that “the Alexander Hamilton Center will not be established at this time due to a lack of consensus about institutional oversight of the Center as a Hamilton program. The College administration and trustees believed the Alexander Hamilton Center to have significant potential to enhance the educational experience of Hamilton students and regret that it is not going forward.”

Consequences of the AHC Debate

The winter months passed with little news on the AHC, leaving faculty, students, and alumni in the dark about what had happened. Then, in late February, Menges resigned from his position as life trustee, one final blow to the AHC that he had long supported.

During a faculty meeting last September, President Stewart promised to make administrative decisions as transparent as possible. But the debate over the AHC has been anything but transparent. Students were more than capable of actively participating in the debate over the AHC, if only we had been given the chance. No one will doubt that the every faculty member, administrator, and trustee who voiced an opinion about the AHC had the best interest of the College in mind. The only voice missing from the debate was that of the student body.

Why will there not be an AHC at the College? Some will blame the “culture wars” at Hamilton, while others will blame the founders for failing to compromise, although the revised draft tells a different story. The negotiations for the Alexander Hamilton Center were kept between administrators, faculty, and trustees. Most students were completely unaware of the debate, and thus unable to add their voices. So in light of the AHC controversy, Hamilton students are left with one responsibility: start asking questions.