

Sowers story sparks online discussion

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Published on Feb. 7, 2020 by [The Record](#)

Since Goshen College first released President Rebecca Stoltzfus' official apology to Katie Sowers on Jan. 22 for denying Sowers a volunteer coaching position on the basis of her sexual orientation, reactions on social media from within and beyond the Goshen College community have been mixed. Many commenters have expressed gratitude for the college's statements, while others shared profound frustrations and concerns.

President Stoltzfus followed up her initial apology to Sowers on Jan. 22 with a blog post on Feb. 3, "What binds us all together," in which she acknowledged the mixed responses from the community.

"The responses from our students, employees, alumni have been mostly positive, though understandably varied, reflecting the diversity of experiences and the deep tensions inherent as we work through painful realities," she wrote in the blog post, which was published on the GC Facebook page the next day.

Annelise Baer ('16), one of the former women's soccer players who spoke out about past misconduct in the athletic department in 2018, shared the college's post with the following response:

"Watch closely. This is how violence happens. Goshen will continue to release statements that very quickly take over the narrative," she wrote. "If your response wasn't positive, it gets cataloged as 'varied' and 'diverse'."

When further questioned about the nature of responses from the community, President Stoltzfus stated she is aware of the spectrum of responses, both those from the Goshen College community and outside. The statement was nationally recognized by USA Today, The Washington Post, NBC Sports and CNN.

"The majority of these [responses] have expressed appreciation and many have shared moving stories," Stoltzfus said in an email. "A few have been critical. I have responded personally to all of them, and I value that opportunity."

Other responses to the president's blog post were more positive.

"My hope and prayer is for the learning, healing and grace – on all sides," one user said.

On Twitter, a trail of tension has surfaced in response to the Feb. 4 post, beginning with the single comment of one Twitter user in reply to Goshen College.

“... you NEVER would have decided to be ‘inclusive’ had this not made national news,” they said. “Get with the times.”

Katie Baer, a junior and a member of the LGBTQ+ community, shared a quoted retweet of Goshen College’s post hours later on Feb. 4.

In reference to the fact that the president did not explicitly mention the reason for Sowers’ denial, Katie Baer said, “She wasn’t hired because she is GAY, why can we not say this?”

Baer added the hashtag “#DoBetterGC” at the end of her tweet, referencing a new campaign announced last week by GC’s Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DEI) Task Force in response to a hate speech incident that occurred on campus in November. The campaign will include a series of open space discussions intended to facilitate “inter-group dialogue for the purpose of strengthening our campus community,” according to Gilberto Perez, dean of students.

Into Account, an organization that worked closely with several female soccer players, including Annelise Baer, who reported historic misconduct in 2018, then retweeted Katie Baer’s post and commented on Goshen College’s initial post, stressing that GC should listen to the voices of LGBTQ+ members of the community.

“It’s not your turn to talk,” they wrote. “It’s queer people’s.”

The DEI’s #DoBetterGC campaign could provide the space for that to happen. President Stoltzfus said in an email that the DEI Taskforce, Student Senate, Restorative Justice Network and open space conversations are “helping us do better.”

President Stoltzfus’ official apology to Sowers, which acknowledged previous denial of employment on the basis of sexual orientation, was initially posted on Goshen College’s Facebook page two weeks ago. It now has 149 shares.

Beyond the unusually high number of shares for a GC post, the 71 comments below the post reflect positive and negative reactions to Sowers’ denial and the president’s apology.

“The college’s policies in this regard are a big reason I have not given to the college as an alumni member,” one Facebook user said.

“And why I’m not encouraging my daughter to attend,” said another.

Still, more than half of the comments on Facebook are positive, affirming the steps GC has taken in response to Sowers’ story of discrimination shared with NBC Sports Bay Area in a January interview.

Wilma Harder (‘84) thanked the president for releasing the statement before continuing to voice the pain many in the GC community are still reconciling with.

“I am beyond a doubt relieved that Rebecca Stoltzfus issued an apology to Katie Sowers and that she extended it to everyone ever affected by GC administration’s homophobia,” she said. “I never expected even that much to happen in my lifetime.”

On Twitter, responses to the Jan. 22 post from Goshen College linking to the president’s apology were much fewer and entirely critical.

Goshen College “wouldn’t hire her because she’s gay, and then all of the sudden issue an apology 10 years later because she’s in the national spotlight?” one user wrote, and then suggested the apology was a bid for fame.

When asked if the basketball coach who denied Sowers’ voluntary offer of employment has been or will be contacted, Stoltzfus gave no answer. Athletic Director Harold Watson confirmed that Steve Wiktorowski was head coach at the time.

Sowers, who on Sunday appeared in Superbowl LIV as the first female and first openly gay coach, has yet to respond to a request for comment.