



## Dorothy A. Johnson Center FOR PHILANTHROPY

### Public Statements, Commentary, and Content: A Policy and Position Guide

Public statements, commentary, and content related to current events, holidays, public announcements from other groups, public policy initiatives, etc. play an important role in the communications efforts of any organization that is public-facing. Public statements, commentary, and content are some of the tools that organizations can use to join in local/national conversations, to share information, to communicate organizational values, to help foster cultural change, to call for or accept accountability, etc.

The Dorothy A. Johnson Center for Philanthropy (Johnson Center) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) reaches an audience of thousands of philanthropic practitioners and community members through its digital channels, published works, and professional networks. As individuals, and as an organization we hold many overlapping and complex roles. The Johnson Center is:

- a national thought leader in the philanthropic sector and its infrastructure;
- an academic center of GVSU, a public university in the state of Michigan;
- a workplace centered in Grand Rapids, Michigan; and
- a collective of individuals and teams who bring their own lived experiences, perspectives, and expertise to their work.

It is therefore critical that the Johnson Center be thoughtful in balancing its many roles when considering whether and how to provide content, commentary, or a public statement on any given topic. It is also important that the purpose of sharing that content is clear.

This policy is intended to provide guidelines for balancing these roles and establishing rationales in decision-making regarding the Johnson Center's official communications. It is not expected to be comprehensive, and all decisions and messaging are ultimately dependent on the unique situation.

**Please note:** For the purposes of simplicity, this document uses the word “content” to refer generally to all material that could be shared with the public, including but not limited to published research reports, event- or topic-specific public statements, new or previously published blog posts, brief quotes or images, media articles, and similar materials produced by GVSU or our peers in philanthropy.



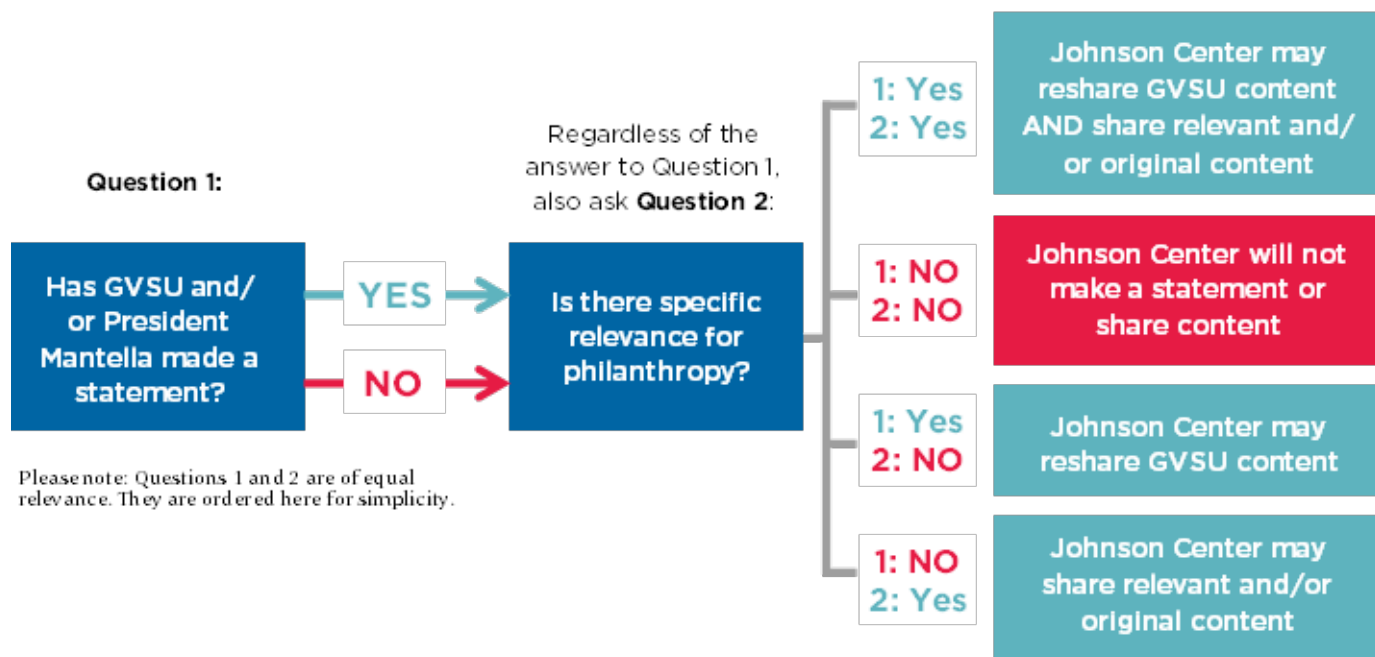
## Taking a Stand Versus Offering Thought Leadership

The Johnson Center recognizes the difference between taking a position on a particular issue and providing thought leadership related to that issue. It is key to the Johnson Center's mission to provide research and thought leadership that helps practitioners understand events and movements in the field, consider relevant questions or points of view, identify examples, or employ data that can inform their own work.

In general, the Johnson Center avoids taking public positions on issues – such as advocating for or against particular regulations on donor-advised funds (DAFs) – but may do so at the discretion of the executive director, in accordance with GVSU's policies, and in alignment with our organizational values.

## General Guidance Decision Tree

Johnson Center staff encounter valuable, shareable content all the time – in their own practice (e.g., coming across an interesting article) and in their conversations with partners (e.g., a partner may ask us to share their recently published report). All staff are welcome to approach the Communications team with a request to share content. Those conversations should be guided first by the General Guidance Decision Tree and proceed to additional questions as necessary.



## Additional Questions to Ask in Decision-Making

The General Guidance Decision Tree is the first line of decision-making. Other questions or circumstances may be relevant to the Johnson Center's decision to make a statement, to share relevant existing content, or to develop new content (e.g., research, blog posts, quotes for social media) to address the specific situation. These questions include:



### **1. What is the purpose of sharing this content?**

Does the content align with our values? Does the content help to inform the public about philanthropy, or further a public conversation? Does the content fulfill an obligation to a partner or client? The rationale for sharing the content will impact whether or not the Johnson Center ultimately does share it.

### **2. Does the Johnson Center have expertise in the subject of the event? Is the Johnson Center considered to be a leading voice on the topic or in the relevant community/network?**

If “yes,” the Johnson Center will share relevant content according to staff capacity. If “no,” the Johnson Center will likely remain silent or lift up content from more expert peers.

### **3. Does the event involve partners, clients, or funders of the Johnson Center?**

If the Johnson Center has relevant, situation-specific content to share, we may do so. However, if the nature of the event is irrelevant to our work and relationship with that partner/client/funder (e.g., the decision to open or exit a line of work), we may remain silent.

### **4. Are any of the key stakeholders connected to the event public or elected officials? Is the event/topic a matter of political advocacy or public policy?**

The Johnson Center may contribute to public discussions regarding proposed/existing public policies that impact philanthropy in accordance with our areas of expertise and institutional values – e.g., sharing relevant research, supporting open data, advancing diversity and inclusion.

Where the issue/event is indirectly related to philanthropy (i.e., the policy impacts mission areas such as conservation or education, but not necessarily institutional philanthropy itself), the executive director has the authority to determine whether and when the Johnson Center will comment.

The Johnson Center does not endorse candidates for public office.

### **5. Does the event or any of the persons involved have a special relationship with the Johnson Center – e.g., are they a former employee? Is the event specific to Grand Rapids, or GVSU?**

Generally, if the Johnson Center has relevant, situation-specific content to share, we may do so. However, if the nature of the event is irrelevant to our work, we may remain silent.

It is important to consider how the event/topic impacts the staff of the Johnson Center as human beings and neighbors. Depending on the nature of the event (e.g., a staff member is elected to public office, Michigan experiences a natural disaster), the executive director and center leadership may choose to respond publicly.

## **Statements that Align with Our Values**

The Johnson Center supports the following concepts in alignment with its values, and therefore may share content supporting the following:

- We support more giving by more people. We celebrate that generosity can take many forms, including the giving of time, talent, treasure, testimony, and ties.



- We support efforts to increase institutional transparency and partnership across philanthropy, government, and business, including increasing opportunities to share and use data about each sector for the good of all.
- We believe in the fundamental equality of all human beings and celebrate diversity.

The executive director has the authority (in alignment with GVSU policies) to determine whether and when the Johnson Center will sign on to public calls for action.

## Final Decision-Making Responsibility

In alignment with GVSU's policies, the executive director of the Johnson Center has final decision-making authority over whether and what content the Johnson Center will share publicly. The Johnson Center's director of communications and strategic partnerships has responsibility to make most decisions regarding the Johnson Center's public communications, in alignment with the policy laid out in this document. As a unit of GVSU, those decisions are guided by GVSU's University Communications team, the Vice Provost for Research Administration and Executive Director of the Center for Scholarly and Creative Excellence, and ultimately GVSU's President.

In the executive director's absence, the director of communications and strategic partnerships will, in consultation with the directors and chairs, make the final decision on public communications.

All Johnson Center staff are encouraged to speak with the director of communications and strategic partnerships and/or the executive director regarding the Johnson Center's public comments or lack thereof.

## Public Content Shared by Individual Staff Members

### As Representatives of the Johnson Center

Public statements made by current staff members when representing the Johnson Center must comply with this organizational policy. Any staff who receive a media request should inform the director of communications and strategic partnerships who can provide guidance, clearance, and any relevant context.

Staff members who wish to make public statements that are specifically tied to their role at the Johnson Center (e.g., a staff member wishes to publish an article in a philanthropy trade publication and include their position title and Johnson Center affiliation in their byline), may do so with the knowledge and approval of the Johnson Center's director of communications and strategic partnerships and executive director.

### As Private Individuals

Current staff members may make whatever statements they deem appropriate on their personal social channels or through their personal networks – so long as all statements comply with GVSU's standards for professional conduct and any contracts, MOUs, or other legally binding agreements the Johnson Center/GVSU have entered into with external or internal partners. These statements should NOT include your identification as a Johnson Center employee and should use personal email addresses for contact information if needed.