



ACTA
AMERICAN COUNCIL OF
TRUSTEES AND ALUMNI

June 18, 2013

Mr. Giles K. Kemp
Chair, Board of Managers
Swarthmore College
38 Lockwood Road
Scarsdale, NY 10583

Dear Mr. Kemp:

I know the disturbance at the May 4 meeting of the Board of Managers was deeply distressing to many in the Swarthmore College community. A free society depends upon the right to voice – and hear – dissenting views on any topic of discussion.

The disruption of the meeting by a group of student demonstrators violated those principles. The students pressed their demands on university leaders in thoughtless ways, drowning out students who wanted to voice other perspectives, and shutting down a reasoned discussion of the university's investment policies.

Academic freedom and the free exchange of ideas are at stake. I am sure you recognize the danger: what happened at the May meeting could encourage others to resort to similar coercive tactics, or worse. To prevent such a likely outcome, the board must make it a top priority to ensure an environment of constructive dialogue.

When faced with similar challenges in the 1970s, then Yale president Kingman Brewster convened a panel of distinguished scholars who produced a seminal statement on academic freedom, now known as the C. Vann Woodward Report. The report, which is included in the enclosed volume, *Free to Teach, Free to Learn*, outlines procedures for ensuring that the campus environment fosters an open debate and respects the right to dissent. We urge you to call upon your president to ensure that Swarthmore has in place a similar framework, and to clarify that coercive disruptions violate the Swarthmore community's values.

We also urge you to examine the enclosed report of the Kalven Committee convened by then University of Chicago president George W. Beadle to prepare "a statement on the University's role in political and social action." It was prompted by circumstances not altogether unlike those at Swarthmore, where individuals on campus opposed various actions by the university in the context of the National Defense Education Act of 1958.

After lengthy deliberation, the Committee reached a "deep consensus" on the appropriate role of the university as a neutral forum for the purposes of teaching and research: "The neutrality of the university as an institution arises then not from a lack of courage nor out of indifference and insensitivity.... It arises out of respect for free inquiry and the obligation to cherish a diversity of viewpoints."

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While the report allowed for “extraordinary circumstances” where students, faculty and others could question “through existing channels” whether the university was behaving responsibly, it concluded that there was a “heavy presumption against the university taking collective action or expressing opinions on the political and social issues of the day, or modifying its corporate activities to foster social or political values, however compelling and appealing they may be.”


In glosses written especially for the enclosed volume, both former Harvard University president Lawrence Summers and Boston attorney Harvey Silverglate call upon administrators and trustees to respond vigorously when students or others seek to use the university to advance their ideological agenda. Otherwise, Silverglate opines, “the university simply cannot perform the functions demanded of it in a free society.”

The recent events at Swarthmore necessitate brave and thoughtful action. You, the Board of Managers, can take action as fiduciaries. When students use force or intimidation to disrupt the free exchange of ideas, the president and trustees should be clear, through their pronouncements and policies, that they will act firmly to hold those students accountable.

We urge you to call upon your president to ensure that similar disruptions will not take place in the future. And we encourage your board publicly to affirm its commitment to institutional neutrality and to acknowledge the right of all members of the Swarthmore community to participate in campus dialogue without fear of coercion.

We are eager to help the Board in any way we can and welcome a response. Thank you for your service to American higher education.

Warm regards,



Anne D. Neal
President

Enclosure

cc: Neil R. Grabois, Vice Chair, Swarthmore Board of Managers
Jorge L. Aguilar, Swarthmore Board of Managers
Richard Barasch, Swarthmore Board of Managers
Dulany Ogden Bennett, Swarthmore Board of Managers

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