

An Open Letter to Swarthmore's Board of Managers

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By **Peter Berkowitz** - June 28, 2014

Dear Members of the Board:

I read with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation the unexpected announcement earlier this month that President Rebecca Chopp is departing Swarthmore to become the chancellor of the University of Denver.

Anticipation because as a grateful graduate of Swarthmore, I can't help but view the hiring of a new president as an opportunity for the school to rededicate itself to the true mission of liberal education, which is to prepare students for the rights and responsibilities of freedom by furnishing and refining their minds. Trepidation because I fear that Swarthmore's next president will lead the college further down the path of politicized research and curriculum that has become the hallmark of our finest colleges and universities.

It is your responsibility to form a search committee and oversee the process by which the college chooses its next president. You would not be serving on the board if you were not men and woman of substantial accomplishments and if you did not love Swarthmore. But I worry that your fond memories of the liberal education you received will thwart your understanding of what liberal education has become. And I fear that you will give inordinate weight to the assessment of today's professors and administrators in judging Swarthmore's current condition.

Today's educators cannot be counted on to provide an accurate evaluation. In February, I saw a dramatic illustration of their obliviousness while attending a Swarthmore symposium on the future of the liberal arts. It was as if I had entered a time warp.

In several rounds of panels, Swarthmore graduates who had gone on to positions of distinction in university teaching and administration spoke about the kind of liberal education that I cherished as an undergraduate. It encouraged questions, spurred students to see issues from a variety of angles, and fostered the mutually respectful exchange of opinions. It was an education for which I will be forever grateful.

The panelists, however, spoke as if this were the sort of education being delivered to today's undergraduates. That, in large measure, is wishful thinking.

Much ink has been spilt over the last 25 years examining the crisis of liberal education: the hollowing out of the curriculum, the aggressive transmission of a uniformly progressive ideology, the promulgation of speech codes, and the violation of due process in campus

disciplinary procedures. Although Swarthmore is not immune from these pathologies, not one speaker at the symposium mentioned them.

In January, a former Swarthmore student who had been expelled in 2013 for alleged sexual misconduct filed a lawsuit against the college in federal court. The student asserts that in administering its disciplinary procedure Swarthmore “failed to follow its own policies and procedural safeguards” in myriad ways and violated his “basic due process and equal protection rights.” The court will adjudicate the claims, but the student’s allegation that the college effectively treated him as guilty until proven innocent is all too plausible.

The contempt for due process of which Swarthmore is accused flows directly from entrenched theories about the pervasiveness of male oppression and female victimization. This dubious conventional wisdom manages to be insulting to both men and women. Nonetheless, it has become embedded in the enormous bureaucracies built in the last few decades on campuses and inside the U.S. Department of Education to deal with women’s issues.

In a recurring pattern during this time, elite colleges and universities convene kangaroo courts to adjudicate accusations of grave crimes that should properly be left to the police and government prosecutors. Although they cannot sentence students to jail time -- the cavalier manner in which these proceedings treat evidence would never pass muster in the criminal justice system -- the campus bureaucracies nevertheless impose penalties capable of upending students’ lives. The Swarthmore student’s counterpunch -- his federal lawsuit -- is one of a wave of legal action brought in the last year or so by aggrieved male undergraduates against their schools for allegedly depriving them of fair and impartial procedures.

Liberty of thought and discussion, a close cousin of due process, has also come under a cloud of suspicion at Swarthmore. The college’s Aydelotte Foundation for the Advancement of the Liberal Arts hosted a conversation in February between Princeton professors Robert George (Swarthmore ’77), a renowned conservative public intellectual, and Cornel West, an eminent progressive public intellectual. The laudable purpose in inviting the two educators, who have co-taught seminars at Princeton to great acclaim, was to improve Swarthmore students’ understanding of the possibility and the importance of the civil, and even friendly, exchange of opinions across partisan lines.

A significant number of students opposed the conversation because of Professor George’s public criticism of same-sex marriage. One undergraduate captured the crux of the objection to bringing George to campus. “What really bothered me,” she said, “is the whole idea that at a liberal arts college we need to be hearing a diversity of opinion.”

Where do students learn such intolerance? The week after the event, Swarthmore professor K. David Harrison penned an op-ed in The Phoenix, the school’s student newspaper, endorsing the view expressed by a student the day before that George’s opinions constituted

hate speech. Harrison was also moved to “strenuously object that my home institution, Swarthmore College (and the Institute for the Liberal Arts) lent its good name, spent money, and gave of its facilities, resources and credibility” to a conversation that included George. On an optimistic note, Harrison added that the campus-wide reaction to the conversation provided an occasion for pride because “an upsurge of dissent by students, faculty and staff now reframes the event as being about condoning bigotry versus championing social justice.”

Such attitudes, I shouldn't have to mention, reflect a profound failure of the liberal imagination. Professor Harrison cannot conceive of the possibility of learning from George -- who supports freedom and equality for gays but argues that the traditional and inherent definition of marriage cannot coherently be extended to include same-sex couples -- or of George learning from him, or more generally of living together in a community of inquiry where members are enriched by exposure to conflicting perspectives on the great moral and political questions of the day.

Few and far between are the instances at Swarthmore in which faculty or administration forthrightly defend the principles of freedom, even when the violation of those principles occurs right in front of their eyes. In May 2013, members of Mountain Justice, an environmentalist club at the school, took over an open Board of Managers meeting intended for the airing of opinions about whether Swarthmore's \$1.5 billion endowment should divest from companies that produce or transport fossil fuels.

As more than 100 students disrupted the meeting, seized control, and shouted down others, the moderator as well as President Chopp and Dean of Students Elizabeth Braun stood silently by. However, according to Swarthmore student Danielle Charette ([writing in the Wall Street Journal](#)), the college administration did promptly acquiesce to the protesters' call for “teach-ins” at which the activists presented demands for requiring for graduation “courses in ethnic studies and gender and sexuality” and for removing the confidentiality that surrounds sexual assault cases, by which they almost certainly meant confidentiality protections for the accused.

The repudiation of due process, the determination to recast opposing opinions and those who hold them as evil, the refusal to vigorously defend the free exchange of ideas -- these are signs that one of the nation's great liberal arts colleges, like many of its peers, has lost sight of the aim and operation of liberal education.

I urge the board to appoint to the search committee for Swarthmore's next president men and women who grasp that liberal education can only fulfill its vital political mission in a free society by resisting the politicization of scholarship and learning.

Sincerely,

Peter Berkowitz '81

Peter Berkowitz is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution, Stanford University. His writings are posted at www.PeterBerkowitz.com and you can follow him on Twitter @BerkowitzPeter.