

# An Open Letter to Swarthmore President Valerie Smith

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor

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Dear President Smith,

Thank you for your "[Reflections on Yesterday's Verdict](#)," which you sent to Swarthmore students, alumni, faculty, and staff on April 21 and posted on the college's website. Prompted by the announcement that Derek Chauvin had been found guilty of murdering George Floyd, you offered brief thoughts on the connection between liberal education and racial justice, social movements, and political change. As a Swarthmore graduate grateful for the long-ago introduction that the college provided me to liberal education, and as an observer of American politics troubled by the nation's widening schisms, I read your message with great interest.

In the spirit of my Swarthmore studies, your reflections have left me with a number of questions. They revolve around the relation between politics and liberal education.

Your message asserts that "[a]lthough the verdict can never truly bring justice for Mr. Floyd and his family, it signals the impact of a powerful social movement." You summon us to join in that social movement, stating, "We must dedicate ourselves anew to the struggle for lasting, meaningful change" in America to bring about "a more just, equitable, and safe society."

You envisage a distinctive role for colleges and universities. "As an institution of higher learning, Swarthmore College is committed to contributing to that change -- by continuing to foster an environment in which students can engage in deep, thoughtful, and frank conversations about the challenges facing our society," you write. "This shared and vital work can and will continue to ensure we provide a transformative liberal arts education grounded in fearless intellectual inquiry."

I certainly believe that liberal education serves America's interest in sustaining a society that safeguards citizens' fundamental freedoms and basic rights. Whether that comports with your understanding turns on what you mean by "a more just, equitable, and safe society" and how you conceive of "a transformative liberal arts education."

If by "a transformative liberal arts education" you intend one that refines and elevates students' minds by transmitting knowledge and cultivating independent thought so that they are better able to exercise their rights, respect the rights of others, and do their part to uphold the nation's constitutional form of government, then we are in full agreement. But for Swarthmore to offer such an education -- the same goes for any institution of higher learning -- the college must

avoid, to the extent possible, taking sides in current political debates and legal controversies. Only by staying out of the political fray as an institution can the college provide a community that genuinely encourages students to energetically and rigorously explore the many sides of hard political questions.

If, however, by “a transformative liberal arts education” you mean an education that aims to instill in students a specific conception of social justice, that brings institutional pressure to bear on students to embrace a college-proclaimed orthodoxy on political issues that divide the nation, and that trains students to exclusively advance one partisan reform agenda, then I fear that Swarthmore will hasten the demise of liberal education. For how can students “engage in deep, thoughtful, and frank conversations about the challenges facing our society” if the college itself takes a firm and public stance on the proper response to those challenges? All that would remain is for students to debate the means for implementing Swarthmore-approved moral judgments and political priorities.

In my view, the college is entirely justified -- obligated, even -- to champion the principles of individual freedom and human equality. These, after all, are the moral premises that underlie our constitutional order. They also inspire liberal education, the governing purpose of which is to prepare students to enjoy the rights and assume the responsibilities of freedom.

But regarding, say, the conservative and progressive interpretations of freedom’s imperatives in particular political disputes, the college has no business taking a stand and organizing students for political action. That goes for professors in the classroom as well as for administrators in Parrish Hall. The proselytizing and partisan mission subverts the educational mission.

The creation of an environment hospitable to the exchange of opinions and the careful examination of rival analyses and assessments is a hallmark of liberal education. The promulgation of opinions and ideas insulated from critical examination, the stigmatizing and silencing of nonconformist voices, and the rallying of members of the campus community around a political cause are distinguishing features of indoctrination.

Whether Swarthmore and colleges and universities across the country are devoted to liberal education or indoctrination is, in my mind, the crux of the matter.

To better understand your views on politics and liberal education, it would be helpful to know more about your thinking on two issues that have generated considerable controversy over the last few years: free speech and the content of the curriculum.

Free speech is a pillar of liberal education. By exposing students to competing ideas and opinions, liberal education develops their ability to break free from one-sidedness and special pleading. The encounter with a diversity of viewpoints also teaches students to respect fellow citizens who see the world differently. These days, it has become fashionable to dismiss free speech as a ruse by which the “oppressors” in the United States control the “oppressed.” Yet that contention flies in the face of historical realities: In democracies, free speech has always been an indispensable ally of minorities seeking to vindicate their rights, dissenters challenging the conventional wisdom, and innovators opening new vistas of inquiry and action.

The 2015 [Report of the Committee on Freedom of Expression at the University of Chicago](#) provides both an eloquent explanation, and rousing defense, of free speech and liberal education. To show that Swarthmore College cherishes free speech because it sustains liberal education, wouldn't it be useful to join with 81 other colleges and universities -- as of March of this year, [according](#) to the Foundation for Individual Rights in Education -- in endorsing the Chicago principles?

One way Swarthmore models its conception of free speech is through the distinguished figures it invites to campus. On May 6, the President's Fund for Racial Justice and the Social Responsibility Committee of the Board of Managers are sponsoring what is bound to be a fascinating and timely event, "[An Evening With Eric Holder: Voting Rights, Leadership, and Social Justice](#)." Wouldn't Swarthmore demonstrate its commitment to, in your words, "deep, thoughtful, and frank conversations about the challenges facing our society" by following up the discussion of voting rights with former President Barack Obama's attorney general by inviting to campus William Barr, attorney general under former Presidents George H.W. Bush and Donald Trump, to hear his thoughts on voting rights?

A well-designed curriculum is another crucial component of liberal education. According to the [college website](#), at Swarthmore "[s]tudents generally spend their first two years exploring, taking courses in a range of disciplines across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences." After students "encounter new ways of thinking" they focus in their final two years on their majors. But isn't it also incumbent on the college to ensure that all students share a common foundation of basic knowledge about the nation and the civilization of which they are part? If, for example, students have not studied the sweep of American political ideas -- from the nation's founding to progressivism and conservatism today -- how can they seriously evaluate and intelligently discuss the competing views of former attorneys general Holder and Barr? Yet, near as I can tell, Swarthmore's [political science department](#) does not offer such a course.

I hope we have the chance to continue the important conversation you launched about politics and liberal education.

Respectfully,

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Swarthmore College, '81

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