

9 June 2014

Friends:

Thank you for your thoughtful letter, which I have read and reflected upon carefully. I appreciate your candor and the forthright manner in which you have expressed your concerns about the Birgeneau matter and your sense of how my administrative colleagues and I value student voices. I am hopeful, as I know that you are, that we can use this opportunity for shared learning and to identify how we can work together to advance our goals for Haverford and our community. Let me say at the outset that I believe deeply in the importance of *our shared* "devotion to Haverford and to the ideals upon which this community is based." This is, above all, why I came to Haverford in the first place.

As I have written on various occasions, the Birgeneau matter has raised several interconnected issues, which may be why it has been so difficult to disentangle. I hope that we can continue to engage each other with goodwill and open minds in order to develop a better shared understanding about the present situation. In order to do this I would like to address separately two related but distinct arguments you put forward in your letter: one, that William Bowen's talk at Commencement represents a form of wrongdoing, perhaps in which I am complicit; and two, that you "see a disconcerting trend" in which students' role in shared governance at Haverford has not been meaningful or respected. While I wish to raise objections to a number of your arguments, I am confident, too, that we share much common ground about the community values we all wish to uphold. Please know that I have taken the time to write this long letter because I respect our dialog and greatly value your contributions to our community, as I hope to demonstrate in the following pages.

#### William Bowen's Remarks

There have been two instances of free expression in this episode that have proven particularly controversial, drawing both celebration and disappointment. Each has been called courageous, spot-on, and Haverfordian by some; each has been called offensive, misguided, and not in keeping with our values by others. Both of these expressions of ideas I have supported fully without shaping or endorsing the content of either. They are, of course, the first letter to Robert Birgeneau and William Bowen's remarks at Commencement.

I would first like to set aside the substance of President Bowen's remarks and discuss my decision to allow him to address the Birgeneau issue at Commencement, a decision about which you have raised concerns. To my mind, the underlying question is whether our community, on whose behalf it is my duty to act in such cases, should set limits on the speech of those whom it invites to speak. My answer is a definitive no. Questions of free speech arise all the time on college campuses, and my view is that limits to speech must meet a very high standard (the "yelling

'fire' in a crowded theater" argument). To my surprise, I have had to uphold this standard on multiple occasions already at Haverford. For the purposes of this exchange, I have supported every individual's or group's right to speak throughout this controversy. Towards that end, it was I who initially suggested to Michael Rushmore and Brian Brown that they write a "Haverfordian" letter to Dr. Birgeneau raising their concerns, this in the hope that meaningful dialog and peaceful confrontation would lead to shared understanding. They readily agreed to this proposal. As you note in your letter, it was I who convened the community forum to allow all community voices to be heard, and I remained present for almost three hours until everyone who so desired had a chance to speak. I too think the forum was an instance of Haverford at its best. When President Bowen approached me to ask if he could address the Birgeneau issue as he felt compelled to do, I applied the same standard and allowed that too, and I certainly did not instruct him on what to say, as some have suggested. To be sure, President Bowen's words were his own. By contrast, my own position on the Birgeneau matter is well documented and I therefore did not feel the need to address it in my Commencement remarks. For the record, President Bowen was not given "the time previously allotted to Dr. Birgeneau," nor did he take any more time in offering his remarks than did the other honorary degree recipients, even if he organized his talk into two topics. If you believe that Haverford, and I on our community's behalf, should apply a different free speech standard than that, I respectfully invite you to make your case.

Your letter argues that a speech is not a form of "true dialogue." I disagree, although of course I understand that any articulated response to a speech is not immediate. Forming our "dialogue" on this matter are also all the blogs, web comments, quotes in the media, and public letters from some of you and from many others. Is a published essay or op ed piece any more of a dialog than is a speech? For those of you who might think that Bowen's remarks were the last word, I would point to all of the continued conversation over recent weeks via every conceivable medium, including this letter. Some have included President Bowen himself. These conversations have been challenging, respectful, provocative, and, I believe, useful. The dialogue continues.

Your letter argues that Bowen's remarks were "poorly timed" and "inappropriate" for the occasion of Commencement. Clearly they were not typical Commencement fare. They were opinions that engaged and challenged an issue with currency in our community and in the world at large, and they presented a clear point of view, one that was quite evidently held by some, but clearly not by others within our community. I would ask you what constitutes acceptable remarks for Commencement? Should I have alerted Fred Krupp, another of our honorary degree recipients, that any reference to his controversial position on fracking should be avoided because such remarks would not be appreciated by all graduates? As you may know, this issue was also raised with me by some of the signatories of your letter.

Let us stipulate that Bowen's criticisms, if one revisits the transcript, were toward the *actions* of *some*, not toward any *persons* and certainly not toward the whole class. Does one have a right to be uncomfortable if one identifies with the actions he criticized? Of course one would be justified in so feeling. But receiving judgment for one's actions is an inherent risk of activism. If you take a strong stand on anything you believe in, there are those who will tell you they disagree with you, as they have every right to do. This is why we are corresponding now. If one wished not to be criticized, one could lead a different kind of life free from risk taking or engagement with difficult issues. I do not think that describes Haverford students, nor should it. You of course are free to accept or challenge the criticisms directed your way, and this is elemental to engaged citizenship. (I know that some of you have done exactly that and questioned President Bowen directly about his assertions in compelling and reasonable ways, and he has responded. I would invite you to share those thoughtful exchanges with your peers if you are so inclined.)

Returning to the question of whether President Bowen should have addressed this issue at Commencement, I ask you to consider the following: Put yourself in the mind of the graduating seniors who disagreed strongly with the protests directed at Robert Birgeneau and who felt that the actions and words of some members of the class did not represent their own views. Had no speaker said anything during Commencement about Birgeneau's absence, or, further, if a speaker had celebrated the student activism that resulted in Dr. Birgeneau's withdrawal, would it have been ethically acceptable? My view in both hypothetical cases is, yes, of course—it would have been the right of that speaker to express those views, although I can imagine in each of those cases a different group of graduating seniors would have been disappointed with the Commencement ceremony for their own reasons and might have written a letter analogous to yours. Should we apply a standard that accepts the expression of some opinions and not others at Commencement? I would not want to be in the position of developing or applying any such standard. My contention is that within the Haverford community, and ideally everywhere else, we cannot be selective about who enjoys free speech, or what messages are shared. This is especially important in the midst of conflict and disagreement. Some remarks may be enjoyed more than others, and some listeners may have stronger reactions than others, but opinions and responses should not be taken off the table just because it's a celebratory occasion.

Please know that I am not arguing that the negative feelings you are expressing about Bowen's speech are unreasonable. I know many of you are disappointed or angry, and I wish it weren't the case that Commencement has been diminished for some by this controversy. That reality is something on which our whole community will need to reflect, to the extent that Commencement this year was a culminating moment of a spirited debate on which there was and still is broad disagreement. I am arguing only that the alternative—limiting speech—is deeply antithetical to our values. Nor do I believe Haverford students need to be shielded from views with which they might disagree: you clearly do not.

Finally, I would like to state unequivocally that I respect and commend the commitment of those individuals who acted out their consciences. This I have said publically from the very beginning and it remains so today. Your expressions of dissent were to my mind clearly justified in light of your values, and it was a matter well worth consideration by the broader community. That, above all, is why I proposed the letter in the first place and why the open meeting was so important to all who were present. I certainly do not expect all parties ultimately to agree about the substance of your dissent, but we can all agree that working through difference is a challenge worth our best efforts and in service to the highest of the College's ideals.

### Students and Shared Governance

As many of your classmates can attest, one of the primary reasons I came to Haverford is to experience the substantive and productive engagement of students in issues that matter to the community, whether through formal governance processes or in ad hoc ways. This has created a remarkably engaged community that cares deeply about values. You may not have the benefit of experiencing other kinds of undergraduate communities, but I hope you know that this place is wonderfully unique. Haverford is distinctive in the opportunities it provides for students to shape their own institution, and Haverford students meet that challenge. During the past year, and notwithstanding your assertions to the contrary, I have found you and your peers to be insightful, creative, passionate, empathetic, and articulate in ways I have not seen elsewhere in my career. As President, I consider it a privilege to be a champion for our students, a role I have played with great enthusiasm throughout the year.

As it happened, my arrival at Haverford coincided with our need to address a number of very challenging issues. Two of the most visible were those of divestment and financial aid, on which students were vocal about their values and ideas. In both of these cases, students were part of the process and directly shaped the outcome. Their voices were important to me, to faculty and administrative colleagues, and to the Board. I know that many students--indeed many of us across the community--wished that we could have found a way to afford the no-loan policy, or to divest from fossil fuels. In our collective judgments, we couldn't.

However, there is also good news, and it is consequential. Thanks in part to student advocacy about financial aid, we are in advanced stages of planning for a loan forgiveness program to moderate against the effects of reintroducing loans, and we found ways to hold on to a no-loan policy for a large portion of future students. Thanks to student advocacy for sustainability, we are now revamping our approach to environmental responsibility including new curricula, significant reductions in GHG emissions, and the naming of a chief sustainability officer to help us keep our focus and marshal the resources needed to achieve new objectives. Other areas of student concern, including greater support for diversity

within our community and new initiatives in the area of ethical leadership are also moving forward in exciting ways, both with the recent addition of significant new funding. These will be important initiatives for us all in the year ahead.

Student views also guided the Birgeneau controversy at every step along the way, although those views were wide ranging. Notably, those of you who wished that the Board had rescinded the College's invitation to Dr. Birgeneau should know that the Honorary Degree Committee, which includes students, was in consensus in recommending not to do so. In the aftermath of the community forum, I wrote to Chancellor Birgeneau to explain the importance of the non-violence issue for us all, and to Michael Rushmore to reaffirm my support that he and his peers protest if they feel compelled to do so. I never said otherwise. In the wake of this episode, we will be reformulating our honorary degree selection process for the future. All year, students have been engaging on these and other critical issues and have been significant contributors to Haverford's shared governance. Without student advocacy, each of these issues would have been resolved differently—and no doubt less well in various ways.

On each of the issues I have mentioned here—divestment, financial aid, and Birgeneau—there has surely not been unanimity of student perspectives. Nor was there unanimity among others with a stake in the issues: faculty, staff, alumni, and board members. To draw the conclusion that student voices are categorically “excluded” or “dismissed” because the ultimate decisions are not precisely what you or a segment of the community had wished for is to misconstrue what shared governance is all about. These issues aren't about winning or losing or getting a particular way; they are about sharing perspectives and ideas in order to optimize outcomes among competing interests and within the constraints of an imperfect world. Compromise is often required, and I am proud that we faced hard choices together and found ways forward, imperfect as they might have been to anyone with a particular opinion. Of course, for those who believe that compromise on a given issue is unacceptable, they may rightly feel the moral obligation to voice their dissent or to protest.

So, I must confess that I do not understand your claim about “the administration paying lip-service to student opinions and dissent, while ultimately excluding or dismissing their voices from decisions that affect the entire Haverford community.” It can be hard to hear what you don't agree with or to accept a result you do not personally support, I know from experience, but it is a mistake to take that for disrespect, or even worse, disregard. It disheartens me to hear this criticism after the many meaningful exchanges my colleagues and I have had with students in countless meetings, forums, committees, and debates through which students have contributed substantively to our shared governance. It does a disservice to you and your peers who have given of yourselves and who have made a difference.

If the efforts I and others have made this year to engage and work with students have been ineffective or ill conceived, I hope that together we can identify

alternative approaches. I am not wedded to any particular process, structure, or mode, only to the ultimate goal of meaningful shared governance. I am confident that the leaders of Students' Council, Honor Council, Customs, and numerous other students with whom I have worked can attest to that. Therefore, in response to the question you ask me in your last sentence about what I will do to restore your faith in respect, dialog, dissent, and justice, I ask you too to partner with me and all of our colleagues to help us achieve our shared objectives and live up to our ideals. We are one community and the work ahead will require the best in all of us.

I look forward to continuing this discussion and, even more, to working together in the months and years ahead. What we achieve will be possible only if we achieve it together. We are all fortunate to be part of such a special community.

Sincerely yours,

Dan Weiss