

**Sam
Warren**
21 Years Old

*Sam Warren is
from northern
California and
attends
Haverford
College in
Pennsylvania.*

**graduation
strikes back
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Photo credit: Joe Seiler (The Haverford Clerk)

Since When Does Free Speech Require Students Stay Quiet?

This year, students are standing up against unjust commencement speakers. Haverford joins the fight.

By Sam Warren

Since former University of California, Berkeley Chancellor Robert Birgeneau declined to receive an honorary degree from my very own Haverford College, commentators have decried the intolerance of the protesters who criticized his invitation to commencement. Student speech obstructed Birgeneau's right to free speech, they say—as if its legitimate exercise requires the conferral of an honorary degree and a perch on a podium.

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Haverford President Daniel H. Weiss echoed such sentiments, if more diplomatically, in a May 20 editorial (<http://www.haverford.edu/news/stories/78507/51>) for the Philadelphia Inquirer: “When an individual is invited to speak at an institution that holds freedom of expression as a core value, and then for whatever reason does not attend, the cause of free speech has inevitably suffered.”

That for whatever reason bothers me. For whatever reason whitewashes Birgeneau’s role in the violent suppression of student speech. For whatever reason ignores that students spoke up against honoring Birgeneau for fear that doing so would itself stifle free expression. For whatever reason claims that context isn’t important.

I disagree. Context is everything. So, out of frustration with that for whatever reason, I would like to provide some.

Weiss announced Haverford’s four honorary degree recipients (http://www.haverford.edu/commencement/honorary_degrees/) on April 17. “Each of these individuals exemplifies ideals we hold dearly at Haverford College,” he wrote in an email to the senior class, “and I hope you share my excitement that they will be connected with your graduating class in perpetuity.”

As a sophomore, I did not receive Weiss' email, but I was already familiar with Robert Birgeneau. I grew up the son of a professor at the UC campus in Davis, California, about an hour's drive from Berkeley; University of California matters were dinner table talk for me. Birgeneau's had been a household name in my family since November 2011, when police brutally dispersed the peaceful Occupy Cal protests at UC Berkeley at the behest of Birgeneau and other campus administrators. Even after video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=buovLQ9qyWQ>) of the incident went viral, Birgeneau stood by the police action, releasing a statement (<http://newscenter.berkeley.edu/2011/11/10/message-to-the-campus-community-about-occupy-cal/>) that described linking arms as "not non-violent civil disobedience."

Such words would be objectionable in any context, but they are especially so for an honoree of Haverford, a Quaker-founded college that prides itself on a commitment to nonviolence and social justice—values, Weiss would surely say, that we hold dearly.

Michael Rushmore thought as much. A member of the Class of 2014, he looked up his honorary classmates shortly after receiving Weiss' email, and was alarmed by what he found about Birgeneau. Rushmore posted on Haverford's online forum, where he gathered a group of similarly concerned students and faculty—Maud McInerney, an English professor

and Berkeley Ph.D., was an early supporter. When Rushmore and fellow senior Brian Brown met with Weiss and other administrators, all agreed that the dissenters should write a letter to Birgeneau.

The resulting letter

(http://www.haverford.edu/communications/commencement_controversy_resources/files/Letter-to-Dr-Robert-Birgeneau.pdf) has drawn much criticism for what some have construed as its overly strident tone. “When trust is violated in our community, we seek to restore our bonds through restorative, not punitive, processes,” it reads in part. “In the spirit of these restorative processes, before you are honored by our community, we believe it is necessary for you... to take responsibility for the events of November 9, 2011.” The letter then urges Birgeneau to take nine actions, such as accepting responsibility for his role in the violence and supporting reparations for those peaceful protesters assaulted by police; were he to “refuse to confront the issues before him,” it says, the dissenters would have “no other option than to call for the college to withdraw its invitation.”

Weiss himself was disappointed with the letter’s tone, describing

(http://www.haverford.edu/communications/commencement_controversy_resources/files/DHW-Letter-to-Birgeneau-signatories.pdf) it as “an ultimatum with a long list of conditions”; former Princeton President William G. Bowen, accepting his own honorary Haverford degree on May 18, characterized the letter in his commencement speech as “an intemperate list of demands.” McInerney objects to this characterization, which has nonetheless been widely

repeated in the national media. “To say, ‘We urge you to do x, y, and z’ is not to make a demand. It’s to ask forcefully that you do something,” she told me later. “I am still frustrated by people’s determination to misread that letter.”

Birgeneau, for his part, seemed disinclined to support McInerney’s interpretation. His response (http://www.haverford.edu/communications/commencement_controversy_resources/files/Haverford-Student-Response.pdf) to the student letter read, in its entirety: “First, I have never and will never respond to lists of demands. Second, as a long time civil rights activist and firm supporter of non-violence, I do not respond to violent, untruthful verbal attacks.”

To Weiss’ credit, he did share Birgeneau’s response with the campus community, via a May 6 email in which he also called a forum to discuss the controversy. The forum, held two days later, was attended by a substantial number of students and faculty members, as well as several representatives from the Honorary Degree Committee and Weiss himself. So many felt moved to speak that the forum did not conclude for over two hours.

While sentiment on the letter was split, speakers—almost without exception—either came down against Birgeneau’s invitation, or took no position on it. Honorary Degree Committee member Sarah Willie-LeBreton remarked near the end of the forum on the obvious lack of consensus

around Birgeneau's acceptability to the community, expressing a desire to "re-evaluate" his invitation. Weiss himself later wrote (<http://www.haverford.edu/today/story.php?id=78493&u=431>) that he had acquired "a respect and empathy for a number of perspectives that I had not fully appreciated beforehand," and that the forum was for him "an illuminating and valuable conversation"—though one that "regrettably did not include Dr. Birgeneau."

Birgeneau's absence was not what weighed heaviest on my mind, though I certainly would have liked to see him join our discussion; rather, it was the absence of voices like that of Amanda Armstrong, a graduate student at Berkeley who joined Occupy Cal and found herself at the wrong end of a nightstick. In her stead, Rushmore read a statement she had emailed to him.

"Three times throughout the day, UC police officers attempted to force us to move by striking many of us repeatedly in the chest and stomach with batons, and by pulling others down to the ground by their hair," wrote Armstrong. "Some of my friends and classmates were arrested that day; some had their ribs broken, or suffered other injuries. We all continue to carry psychic, and in some cases physical, scars from November 9, 2011."

Despite the tenor of the forum, Weiss and the Honorary Degree Committee reissued their invitation to Birgeneau. I was disappointed but not surprised, given the complicated and often political nature of such

decisions. At least, I thought, our voices had been heard.

In the days since then, however, I have wondered whether Weiss really did hear our concerns as I had hoped he had.

To honor a man who staunchly refuses to discuss his past endorsement of violence would itself tacitly support violence. When Birgeneau ultimately declined to attend commencement, then, I was relieved; I did not wish to see my own college reinforce the apathy towards violence that pervades much of our society and which surely contributed to the events at UC Berkeley. Certainly, I would have preferred to engage Birgeneau in a productive dialogue, but as Rushmore and fellow graduate Jon Sweitzer-Lamme recently noted

(http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/haverford-students-stand-by-their-protest-of-a-commencement-speaker/2014/05/22/8eddf8c2-e1d4-11e3-810f-764fe508b82d_story.html), a commencement speech is the very opposite of a dialogue. “At our graduation, Mr. Birgeneau was to receive the honorary degree and speak to an audience of nearly 3,000 people. Full stop,” they wrote. “Where is the opportunity for dialogue in that scenario, except through protest?”

In any case, the reason that there has been no open conversation about the events of November 9, 2011 is not that fifty students and faculty at Haverford College were too aggressive in their letter-writing. Dialogue

requires a willing partner, which Birgeneau has given no indication of being—not at Haverford, not anywhere else.

I was shocked, then, when Bowen, one of the three remaining honorees, took to the podium at Commencement to insult the graduating seniors who had signed the letter—apparently with Weiss’ foreknowledge. Lamenting that Birgeneau “failed to make proper allowance for the immature and, yes, arrogant inclinations of some protesters,” Bowen said of Birgeneau: “Aggravated as he had every right to be, I think he should be with us today.” In Bowen’s telling, Birgeneau has more right to be angry with a letter than students do with violence.

Perhaps I should have expected as much from Bowen—who, at the very least, had the excuse of ignorance. He had not been privy to the countless conversations held at Haverford over the past few weeks, and could not fully appreciate the complexity of how the issue played out on campus. So I was doubly saddened when President Weiss took to the pages of the *Inquirer* two days later not to defend his students against the often erroneous and offensive narratives that had taken hold in the wake of Bowen’s speech, but to reinforce them.

Consider the claim that “at Rutgers, Smith, and my own college, Haverford, students threatened to protest or otherwise disrupt” commencement—as if protest is inherently disruptive. Were Robert Birgeneau to show, the

planned protest had been for students to wear buttons that read, “Ask Me About Robert Birgeneau,” in the hopes that they would spark conversation. Weiss and I must have different standards for disruption.

But Weiss’ editorial is most remarkable for what it leaves out. It makes no mention of the fact that student concerns about Robert Birgeneau were entirely based on Birgeneau’s complicity in the violent suppression of free speech at his own university—nor, of course, does it bother to point out that Birgeneau characterizes words as violent but shrugs his shoulders at the very real violence committed against his own students and faculty. It leaves out this crucial bit of context in favor of bland platitudes and for whatever reasons.

But for whatever reason is false. Free speech does not suffer when someone walks away from receiving an honor he was not entitled to in the first place. Free speech suffers when those who speak up are shamed for doing so—or, for that matter, beaten.

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chicago dyke · a year ago

as a 40 something, I apologize to your generation. It was hard enough to deal with



as a 40something, i apologize to your generation. it was bad enough to deal with the Orwellian Reagan/Bush administration when i was your age. but so much of what we protested against back then (liberal speech of any kind = treason) has been normalized and accepted today as "conventional wisdom." be proud of yourself and your fellow students for standing up for what should be obvious to your "older and more experienced leaders and mentors." they are acting like spoiled children upset that not all of the other children at a celebration like their snotty friend. you, and your peers, are acting like adults using logic and fact to make a point, peacefully. time will vindicate you and shame those who are criticizing your actions today.

29 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



vitaminC · a year ago

Awesome. Just awesome. The kids are all right.

23 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Jason Weiss · a year ago

Well done! I agree, the kids are all right. And I wish them all the courage and strength in the world in dealing with the shameful mess that the greedy morons of my generation are leaving them.

17 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›

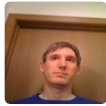


gregorsam · a year ago

Appeal to civility is the last resort of the powerful when they don't have any basis to support their decisions and viewpoints.

Mr. Sam Warren, as a father of two UC alumni, and one myself, I applaud you for the clearheadedness of this article. You make us all feel proud.

14 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Eric_Jaffa · a year ago

When university presidents try to honor slimeballs by giving them speaking slots at graduation ceremonies, students should speak out.

Congratulation on keeping Robert Birgeneau from being honored.

9 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Gemma Seymour · a year ago

Freedom of speech does not mean that people must listen. Freedom of speech does not mean you are entitled to a platform for your views. Freedom of speech does not mean freedom from speech, freedom from criticism, immunity from reprisal.

7 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



David Derbes · a year ago

Also here via Atrios(Duncan Black)'s blog Eschaton.

A tremendous essay. Please send this to William G. Bowen, to Robert Birgeneau and to your own President Daniel Weiss. I would be very interested to read their replies, but my guess is that you would not get any. Still, you should send it on.

A poster at Atrios' was struck by the term "violent ... verbal attacks." I see nothing violent in a letter that makes no threat. Billy clubs and pepper spray, however, I think qualify as violent.

Good luck with your studies. I am very glad to learn of {young}ist.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Kevin Curnow · a year ago

Bravo, Mr. Warren! By far the best post I have encountered about this particular controversy. What a surprise and pleasure it is, as a middle-aged white dude, to

controversy. What a surprise and pleasure it is, as a middle-aged white dude, to find the clearest thinking and best values in the youngest of our citizens, rather than in their desiccated supposed leaders (i.e. the above "presidents").

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Shared Humanity shrink wrapped · a year ago

Beautiful post....thoughtful and challenging....clearly you should not have done such a thing as words like this are violent beyond measure.

6 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



M. Krebs · a year ago

I was born in 1957, and so I'm turning 57 this year. And I say good on you, man, and I hope there's more of this rebellion to come. My generation let things turn to shit (as many do), and for that I'm sorry. So please raise some hell, because you have every right to.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Bloix · a year ago

Talk about Orwellian: "I do not respond to violent, untruthful verbal attacks." Verbal attacks are "violent." Beating people with clubs, that's all in a day's work.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



chethardy → Bloix · a year ago

I'd say that video speaks for itself.

^ | v · Reply · Share ›



SusanMc · a year ago

Here via Atrios and I echo the previous comments. You students who took this on so with such commitment to justice should be proud and I hope your well-written, clear-headed response makes Birgeneau, Weiss, and Bowen ashamed of

themselves--although, if they were capable of shame, you'd think they'd have felt it by now.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



No Comment · a year ago

Yes, yes and yes. Keep on Mr. Warren.

5 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Shared Humanity shrink wrapped · a year ago

My youngest son went to Earlham College, founded by Quakers in 1847. 15% of the student body are Quakers. He is a much better man for it.

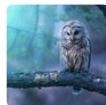
3 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



theod · a year ago

Birgenau is simply a spoiled baby who has attained a position of Elitism that has convinced him he is above reproach all of the time by all of the people. Such an attitude is a byproduct of the excessive public sector paycheck and the many toadies working under him.

2 ^ | v · Reply · Share ›



Anna M. J. Holloway · a year ago

The letter has a rhetorical construct that is a threat stance: "If you do not do some form of x, y, z, we will have no choice but to do A." While I sympathize with the intent of the authors, including a threat stance makes the list into demands. Any kind of either/or language does that. The set of responses have rested entirely on that issue, however, and have TOTALLY ignored the content of the letter or the context of the authors' discomfort. Birgeneau could have been invited to speak on campus, on any topic, and that would be one thing. He was instead offered an honor, in the form of a permanent association with the college, that did not examine

or address the issues of his actions in October 2011. The authors' concerns about that are valid and, for this rhetorician, well taken. The rather cowardly behavior of all the college administrators involved, and the honorees who spoke against these concerns, is very sad.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



Swami_Binkinanda • a year ago

kudos. It seems like even the Birgenau types who claim a heritage of nonviolence have become what they fought against. That none of them can see it seems to point to other facts of their current positions-parasites on the educational system that take over and "drive" the host for their own purposes.

1 ^ | v • Reply • Share ›



best essay writing website • 3 months ago

Everything has a limitation especially that there are a lot of people who already use

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