

### President Weiss On Commencement 2014

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I am writing to report on the controversy surrounding our invitation to Dr. Robert Birgeneau to receive an honorary degree and come to campus as one of four speakers to our graduating class of 2014.

This unfortunate episode has caused concerns among people on all sides of the issues. News coverage reported certain facts of the matter, but judging by what people have said to me or posted online, I hope you will find the following points helpful.

First and foremost, the College did not withdraw, rescind or in any way walk away from its decision to honor Dr. Birgeneau for his good work on behalf of millions of people over decades of service. After those who oppose this tribute made clear their objection, I convened a community meeting – a customary venue for Haverfordians to share their thoughts – which I think enabled us all to appreciate one another's points of view.

Attendees included members of our Honorary Degree Committee, including students, faculty, staff, alumni, Board and Corporation. They did not dismiss or discount the concerns that were voiced, but listened with open hearts and minds. In the context of one of the more contentious issues that the Haverford community has faced in recent years, numerous students later told me that this candid, challenging conversation was one of the seminal moments of their college careers. I know that many were moved by, and felt a new appreciation for, the place of the Occupy Movement in the lives of American college students. However, the Committee and I reaffirmed our decision to invite Dr. Birgeneau to commencement. I did so emphatically in a subsequent letter to him.

As many observers have pointed out, had he spoken at our event, anyone who took exception to his appearance would have been free to do so in any number of ways. Indeed, they are guided by their judgments just as our Honorary Degree Committee of representatives is guided in nominating those who should be considered for an honorary degree.

That Dr. Birgeneau chose not to attend is both unfortunate and understandable. Having participated in dozens of such events myself, commencement is a joyous celebration, and I will never second-guess any speaker's decision to step aside in the face of opposition to their appearance, nor would I burden an individual with my expectations about what they should or should not be willing to tolerate on principle.

What is clear, in my view, is that our community is the poorer for not hearing from a man whom I have described as one of the most consequential leaders in American higher education. He has much to offer, and I am disappointed that those celebrating our Class of 2014 on their graduation day will not go forth into the world with the benefit of his insights about some of the most pressing issues of our time.

Despite this, I believe that over the course of four years – right up until the moment they receive their diplomas – we have enabled our newest alumni to make the most of both the opportunities and the challenges they will face, and that our recent debate will inform their sense of constructive engagement. There is benefit and light in all things, and it is up to each of us to find it. I have great confidence in our Class of 2014 to do so.

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