

May 3, 2014

Dear Dan,

Thank you for sharing the letter voicing student and faculty concerns with me over the granting of an honorary degree to Robert Birgeneau. While I take a wider view of his leadership over many years, I also appreciate their critiques. I protested the granting of a degree to Drew Lewis in 1986, but he came to campus, spoke to us, and in the end, I gave him a standing ovation--not for his role in undermining the PATCO Union--but for entering into genuine conversation with us, expressing his desire to have acted differently, and respecting the Quaker process of consensus. My own thinking about social protest continues to be informed by my experience at Haverford.

The letter you shared with me is angry and powerful, and while it's very good for me to know that Haverfordians are alert to the world around them, I wonder at the desired outcome. It may be that they simply do not agree with the awarding of the degree. It may be to shame or trigger Dr. Birgeneau. It is unlikely to be persuasive as it is currently worded. I would hope it would rise to an even greater outcome, to enter into conversation with one of the country's most respected education leaders to persuade him that further dialog beyond his apology several years ago is requested at Haverford. I would hope that, in the spirit of moral suasion, they begin a letter with their third paragraph and invite conversation rather than a list of demands. If I were they, I might say how many of them look forward to positions of leadership in everything from higher education to non-profits to organizing, and they hope to avoid the kinds of showdowns that occurred at Berkeley. That what we refer to at Haverford as "an exchange of values" might offer him an opportunity for a level of conversation he was not able to have in that moment, and offer us the opportunity to communicate just how important non-violent conflict resolution is, not only in our community, but as a way of life. It has taken me 50 years to appreciate truly how effective such an approach is.

All the best,
Sarah

Sarah Willie-LeBreton '86