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WEEK OF MAY 25, 2014 VOLUME 6, NUMBER 16

At Haverford, embarrassment to Quaker education

Sadly, the annual ritual of choosing a commencement speaker has become a contentious undertaking these days. Disgruntled students and faculty protest the administration's choice. Perturbed by the conflict, the speaker withdraws and the controversy goes virile.

I guess the scenario is unavoidable in an age where free speech and political correctness inevitably collide on the nation's college campuses.

I was very disappointed, however, that Haverford College joined Brandeis, Rutgers and Smith in the ignominious spotlight this spring when a group of more than 40 students and three professors objected to the appearance of Robert J. Birgeneau, one of four individuals scheduled to speak at last Sunday's commencement.

Birgeneau, former chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley, is known for his support of undocumented and minority students. But he created a firestorm in 2011 when university police used riot batons and bean-bag guns on students protesting the state's high education system.

Excoriated for violating their rights to free speech and assembly, Birgeneau became a symbol of police brutality against student protesters.

Despite that fact, Haverford Col-

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As I See It

lege administrators invited Birgeneau to speak at commencement. Outraged by the decision, a group of students and three professors wrote to Birgeneau stating that they would support his appearance only if he met certain conditions, including a public apology for his actions, supporting reparations for the victims and writing a letter to Haverford students explaining his position on the controversial events and "what you learned from them."

Predictably, Birgeneau refused, and withdrew from speaking.

The conflict set the stage for last Sunday's commencement when another speaker, William G. Bowen, former president of Princeton University, called the protesters' approach both "immature" and "arrogant," and Birgeneau's withdrawal a "defeat" for the college and its ideals.

Although Haverford no longer claims an affiliation with the Religious Society of Friends, its history, campus culture and values all reflect its Quaker origins.

According to the college's website, Haverford is "a close-knit intellectual

community that combines the Quaker values of dignity, tolerance and respect with a rigorous academic program."

But the student protesters certainly did not treat Birgeneau with much "dignity, tolerance or respect." Nor did their three professors, also Berkeley alums, provide responsible role modeling. I guess they forgot that free speech is a two-way street. In their haste to exercise their own First Amendment rights, the student protesters and their faculty sponsors deprived Birgeneau of his own. Shame on them.

Nor should Haverford's administration be excused for its negligence in selecting Birgeneau. No speaker, even by his mere presence, should ever detract from the true purpose of commencement, which is to celebrate the achievements of the graduates; not to insult a segment of the class. Shame on them.

Perhaps in the future, Haverford's administrators, faculty and senior class should sit down together and agree on all commencement speakers. It would certainly spare the college -- and Quaker education -- another public embarrassment.

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